

GEORGE II, JOSEPH A., Ph.D. *Neighborhood Associations: Security and Hospitality in American Suburban Fiction*. (2013)
Directed by Dr. Christian Moraru. 282 pp.

Formed in the wake of U.S. victories in World War II and in anticipation of Cold War enemies, the American postwar suburb was intended to be a manifestation of a particular national identity. Unsurprisingly, this strong conflation of space and identity has drawn its share of critics and satire, and suburbia has come to represent conformity and exclusion in the public imagination. Against these assumptions, however, a striking number of fictions set in suburbia reveal a plurality that confounds such dichotomies and exceeds the definitions imposed by real estate developers and home owners' associations. My dissertation "Neighborhood Associations: Security and Hospitality in American Suburban Fiction" calls for a radical reconsideration of the communal possibilities of suburbia by examining representations of neighborhood contracts, of the assumptions held by property owners, of the nuclear family, and of the parent/child bond. According to a surprising range of authors – including John Updike, Gloria Naylor, Jeffery Eugenides, and Chang-rae Lee – suburbia may have been created to ensure security through prefabricated identities and predetermined social engagements, but it is instead imagined as a place where intrinsically different others dwell together. My readings follow recent community studies in American literature, which reject the antisocial individualism identified by Leslie Fiedler and R.W.B. Lewis and place greater importance on social relations. But where many critics think of association as a type of kinship or regionalism, suburbia's embrace of the nuclear family and architectural

homogeneity problematizes such categories. Instead, I argue that suburban fiction better reflects what Sue-Im Lee calls a “nervousness” towards community in American literature, and often features the singularities described by continental philosophers like Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Roberto Esposito. In addition to these philosophical influences, I also approach these works as reactions to the social upheaval and uncertainty of the second half of the 20th century. This focus distinguishes my work from previous studies of suburban fiction; while I share their rejection of the typical accusations leveled at the residential model, I am most interested in the communal implications of the postwar suburb. My study contends that these fictions do not simply critique the exploitative and exclusionary intentions of suburbia’s original designers, but rather illustrate associations that exceed these limitations and extend welcome to infinitely unknowable neighbors.

NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS: SECURITY
AND HOSPITALITY IN AMERICAN
SUBURBAN FICTION

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2013

Approved by

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To Shanda, Dylan, Alyse, and Kierstyn.

APPROVAL PAGE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would be impossible without the aid and patience of various individuals at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, beginning with my fellow graduate students. In particular, I owe thanks to Matt Mullins, Dan Burns, Zach Laminack, and Cindy Webb, for the thoughtful conversation, well-timed comments, and, of course, the many suggestions for further reading.

I would also like to give special thanks to my dissertation committee, starting with my readers Tony Cuda, for reminding me to act like a literary critic and offering boundless reassurance, and Scott Romine, for exposing me to some of the most important texts in my academic development and for supplying infallibly precise and essential critiques. I am most indebted to my adviser Christian Moraru, for introducing me to thinkers who still shape my understanding of what literature is and does, for the intellectual hospitality he has extended, and for the encouragement and guidance he continues to give.

I hope to become a scholar worthy of their example.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: BARBARIANS AT THE GATE, ON THE LAWN, IN THE HOUSE

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

- "Waiting for the Barbarians," C.P. Cavafy

The word "barbarian" has always been a relational term, originally serving to differentiate between proper Greeks and the outlanders, the babblers whose meaningless speech and rough customs made them unfit to join civilization. The word denotes both a communal identity and a spatial arrangement: while the *politēs* who participated in politics and upheld the dominant culture dwelled within the *polis*, the primary site of engagement for Aristotle's "social animals," the *barbaros* were excluded from the city. The terms "citizen" and "barbarian" are now largely symbolic, but the *barbaros/politēs* distinction retains both its social and spatial valances, a fact demonstrated by the development of the American postwar suburb. In the decades following World War II, those who considered themselves the true practitioners and inheritors of the American Dream abandoned the polis to the "unrefined multitude" and escaped to adjacent neighborhoods, returning to cities only to perform necessary commercial tasks. Mass media narratives – about the pleasantly perfect Cleaver family of *Leave it to Beaver* or the modern miracles advertised by Westinghouse and Edison – provided communal myths for these new pilgrims, helping them establish a suburban identity that conflated

material affluence with spiritual satisfaction and moral fortitude.¹ This mythical quality is essential to the postwar suburb's ascendance as the dominant residential model in the U.S., making suburbia into "a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift" (Hayden 3).

Suburbanites, then, are members of an imagined community in the sense intended by Benedict Anderson, and these popular myths imply a "deep, horizontal comradeship" among residents, despite the fact that they likely "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them" (Anderson 6-7). But if communities are realized through the stories told about them, then the suburb also spawned a different type of society, one no less strict in its distinctions. Almost immediately after developers Abraham Levitt & Sons sold the first house in their Long Island Levittown subdivision – the original modern American suburb – commentators such as William Whyte, Betty Frieden, and Lewis Mumford attacked the residential model as an abuse of natural resources and a commercialized grotesque of communal living. Of these diatribes, few were as caustic or merciless as journalist John C. Keats's satire/investigation hybrid, *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Published in 1956, *Crack* tells the story of John and Mary Drone, an entitled and dimwitted couple who escape their cramped urban condo for a cheaply-built house in the misleadingly named Rolling Knolls Estates. Keats's heavy-handed tale introduces many stereotypes still prevalent today: the fascination with unreliable mod-cons, busy-bodies whose interest in their neighbors becomes oppressive, and the obsession with conformity and consumer goods. In the decades that followed,

these stories gave rise to a new variation of the citizen/barbarian division, a conceptual schema that separated the materialistic fakes within suburbia from the urbane sophisticates without.

Literary fiction, however, tends to be far more ambivalent than the for/against binaries implied here, as demonstrated in novels by Sloan Wilson (*The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*), John Updike (*Rabbit, Run*), and Richard Yates (*Revolutionary Road*), to say nothing of short stories by John Cheever and John O'Hara. To be sure, none of these authors – save, arguably, Cheever – celebrate suburbia, at least not to the degree of the paeans sung by “poetess of suburbia” Mona Van Duyn.² Wilson's Tom Rath associates his neighborhood with marital strife and stifling corporate monotony; Yates's Frank and April Wheeler consider their neighborhood a repudiation of their “true selves”; Updike's Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom's neighborhood is all part of the “second-rate” life from which he runs. These stories retain a sense of nervousness, the fear that— as Cavafy's poem suggests – the difference between barbarian and citizen is largely semantic, that the separations intended by property lines and HOAs are uncomfortably blurry.

Neighborhood Associations explores this discomfiting blur by arguing that the usual distinctions between suburban insider and outsider are too reductive, insufficient for describing the depth of pathos Yates gives his seemingly-shallow Wheelers, the heroic quality Cheever imbues in Neddy Merrill and Johnny Rake, or the something “quite intricate and fierce occur[ing] in homes” that fascinated Updike (Howard 11). I argue that rather than celebrate the nationalist and materialist conformity of pro-suburban stories or endorse the antagonistic stance of anti-suburban propaganda, most fictions

instead portray the messy and contingent results of infinite individuals sharing space with one another, making fractured and non-determining communities together. Because none of these stories lend themselves to the simple dualities – urban/suburban, friend/enemy, *politēs/barbaros*– that so many readers assume, they require a nuanced interpretative approach that understands literary fiction as an imaginative response to larger social forces and philosophical desires, which often combines sympathy with satire and refuses to cohere into a fully totalizing comprehension of the text. I provide that approach by tracing portrayals of “critical hospitality” in suburban fiction: moments when infinite others – in the most radical, phenomenological sense of the word; other people who are not bound by the perceiver’s limited perception – share proximity, resulting in face-to-face relations that defy the limiting and contractual forms of community imposed by Home Owners Associations and neighborhood watches or by dismissive, condescending readers. By aesthetically capturing the complexity of these interactions, literary fiction imaginatively refigures and posits singular modes of association based on plurality and difference, simultaneously advancing and critiquing suburbia’s renewed potential as a relational matrix. A range of authors – including white male realists Richard Ford and John Irving, playful postmodernists Don DeLillo and Joyce Carol Oates, satirists Tom Perrotta and T.C. Boyle, and immigrant writers Gish Jen and Chang-rae Lee – reject the traditional imperatives of exclusion and authenticity and focus instead on the explosive relationships that occur when people dwell together.

The Problems and Possibilities of Proximity

This fictional transformation of suburbia into a relational matrix stems from its spatial arrangement, as it is inherently a residential model in which people share proximity. This emphasis on space and interaction is central to Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, a dark and surrealistic tale about a neighborhood built solely for successful African Americans. By all accounts,³ Naylor's novel is among the more fiery anti-suburban screeds, imagining its titular subdivision as a domesticated version of Dante's hell, compete with residents suffering ironic punishments and a devilish traitor at its core, vividly warning African Americans against pursuing Caucasian forms of power. Such responses center on the various betrayals of identity throughout the novel, beginning with founder Luther Nedeed I building his fortune by financing "gunrunners to the Confederacy" and forcing his fellow blacks into restrictive leases (6). As the novel's Dante figures Willie and Lester make their way through the seven rings of Linden Hills, they take readers on a tour of falsehoods, encountering residents who forsake their authenticity to gain immediate material benefits: for instance, Winston Alcott deserts his male lover to enter a financially advantageous marriage with the daughter of an aristocrat, Xavier Donnell fears that his growing attraction to a black woman will sabotage his business dealings, Reverend Hollis forsakes his calling as truth-speaking prophet to retain the admiration of his congregation, and so on. Commentators often correlate this inauthenticity to the novel's opening epigraph, in which wizened mother figure Grandma Tilson warns her child that "You ain't gotta die to go to the real hell ... you just gotta sell that silver mirror God propped up in your soul" to the "highest bidder." The conflict

between capitalism and spirituality found in the poem implies a theme for the rest of the novel, framing the suburb – and the “white god” who spawned and sustains it – as a place where the true self is enslaved and sold (11). Accordingly, *Linden Hills* appears to fit comfortably within the lineage of anti-suburban propaganda, alongside Keats’s *Crack* and the more recent films and television series such as *American Beauty* and *Weeds*.

And yet, very little in the novel supports such a reading, as Naylor repeatedly rejects any form of essentialism and emphasizes instead relational identities and plurality. For all the implication that these characters’ original sin is their refusal of their racial heritage, the novel never posits a model of “pure” blackness – or womanhood or Christianity – to which the characters should adhere. Heroes Willie and Lester, despite their deep affection for one another and shared interest in poetry, are celebrated for their difference: Lester is an overly-macho child of privilege destined to inherit a home in Linden Hills, unlike his sensitive working-class friend, whose stark black skin earned him the ironic nickname “White Willie.” Throughout the novel, Lester and Willie try to create associations outside of the fences that have dominated their lives, the dividers that make one “used to the idea that what they have in there is different, special. Something to be separated from the rest of the world,” and compel residents to “fence your own self in ... protecting it from everybody else out there” (45). Conversely, essentialism and purity is associated most with villain Luther Nedeed V, who strives to maintain his control on the neighborhood and to sire the next generation’s Luther Nedeed. Naylor consistently correlates Luther’s need for perfection with a kind of tyranny by accentuating the horror experienced by his wife Willa, who is locked in the basement with the corpse of her son

for conceiving a child who does not sufficiently resemble his father and grandfathers, or by satirizing his exaggerated pretensions to totalitarianism: “Like every Nedeed before him, his seed was only released at the vernal equinox so the child would come during the Sign of the Goat when the winter’s light was the weakest” (19). Nedeed wishes for such purity that he plans a community that will “reflect the Nedeeds in a hundred facets and then the Nedeeds could take those splintered mirrors and form a mirage of power” (16). The “mirror” image here complicates the one used in the opening poem; if, as is often assumed, Grandma Tilson’s “silver mirror” implied some means of seeing a true self, then it would be no different from Luther Nedeed’s domineering “splintered mirror,” which seeks to display the self on the faces of others. Accordingly, the silver mirror that Grandma Tilson positions as a corrective to the hellish domineering of Linden Hills cannot reflect the self, as it does for Luther, but the other; it points outward, allowing the observer to recognize him or herself in the other, not in the comprehensive sense illustrated by Luther, but in an intersubjective sense. The mirror image suggests that the self is constructed by relating to and taking responsibility for one another, and only this acknowledgement will avoid “hell on earth.”

The fundamental problem in *Linden Hills*, then, is not a failure to retain the inviolable self, but a failure to relate and respond to those in proximity. Xavier Donnell, Winston Alcott, and Reverend Hollis are not presented as miserable fakes because they have ransomed some ur-identity that the novel never provides, but as people who have betrayed those who helped build their selfhoods. Naylor’s novel is far from unique. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, the large majority of suburban fictions take a similarly

manifold approach, portraying groups of people who have nothing in common but the space they share, operating otherwise to the stringent restrictions assumed to be inherent to suburbia. My attention to proximity and its ethical concerns sets *Neighborhood Associations* apart from the other studies of suburban fiction, most notably Catherine Jurca's *White Diaspora*, which calls *Linden Hills* a novel that "endorses every stereotype of the soulless suburbanite," drawing the sharpest distinction "between affluence and spiritual well-being" (169). For Jurca, Naylor's novel presents a black version of the "sentimental dispossession" – "the affective dislocation by which white middle-class suburbanites begin to see themselves as spiritually and culturally impoverished by prosperity" – that she identifies as the defining feature of the twentieth century suburban novel (7). Through these narratives, Jurca argues, "Babbitts begin to think of themselves as Biggers," assuming a sense of "homelessness" that obfuscates the myriad advantages enjoyed by suburbanites. While Jurca's incisive readings do effectively highlight the middle class ennui in novels such as *Revolutionary Road* or David Gates's *Jernigan*, her interpretations too often assume the presence of some "true self" in danger of violation.⁴ She reads suburban communities as those "of [the residents'] own making and choosing," in which "racial and class uniformity of the suburb functions ... as the condition of community" (9, 8). This interpretive model allows Jurca to address some "questions about the alienation and insecurity of the white middle class," but always in terms of an insider/outsider or authentic/inauthentic duality, overlooking the contingent and multifaceted communities so prevalent in these texts, in which members are not independent agents but strangers sharing space.

Keith Wilhite's recent article "Contested Terrain: The Suburbs as Region" issues a rousing call to understand suburban fiction contrary to Jurca's notions of alienation and dispossession, arguing that such language treats the model as "a reified artifact of Cold War cultural critique" (617). Wilhite positions suburbia as "the endgame and final outpost of US regionalism," which clarifies "the fraught relationship between isolationism and imperialism that has shaped US residential geography and, in turn, helps us rethink the role literary texts play in the postwar project of suburban nation building," through which we see the contradiction between "an isolationist strategy in an era of global expansion, and an imperialist, land-grab campaign within US metropolitan regions" (618-619). For Wilhite, suburban fictions mirror the tensions in this public/private dichotomy, in which characters such as the scattered Lamberts of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* or the multicultural Battle family in Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* situate their selves on the global stage through suburban living. Likewise, Robert Beuka asserts the prominence of space in his *SuburbiaNation*, understanding the suburbs as Foucauldian heterotopias that stand as "the material counterpart to specific drives and tendencies in American culture apparent from the postwar years onward." Beuka's readings reveal the development of "not only a new kind of physical landscape, but new psychic and emotional landscapes," making suburban fiction "the mirror ... through which middle-class American culture casts its uneasy reflective gaze on itself" (2,4). Insisting upon the contested nature of these terrains, both in their actual implementation and cultural acceptance, Beuka claims that attention to place in these stories reveals a middle way between utopian desires and dystopian fears, a complexity often ignored by

cultural critics. Re-emphasizing the troubled and plural allows Beauka to analyze suburban fiction as “reflections of our larger cultural sense of suburban place, reflections of the place-specific social dynamics of the landscape that, more than any other, has come to define middle-class American life in the twentieth century” (16).

Despite their notable contributions, both Wilhite and Beauka approach suburban fiction in a similar manner: as a study of individuals in an unreal and ideal space. For these critics, the unease and dissatisfaction commonplace to these narratives are byproducts of the geological machinations of designers and planners, a utopia that ultimately fails. *Neighborhood Associations* agrees that the utopia has failed, but I trace its shortcomings not to the homogenized landscape and its ecological implications, nor to its distance from other spaces; rather, this project argues that the utopia fortunately and necessarily fails because it is filled with people dwelling together – infinitely unknowable others who cannot be reduced to mere cyphers for larger social movements that other readers assume. As such, my project has much more in common with narrowed, genre-specific examinations of suburban fiction, namely Beatrice M. Murphy’s *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* and Katherine Tongson’s energetic *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. Both authors read fictions such as Shirley Jackson’s stories or internet artist Lynne Chan’s “JJ Chinois” persona as indications of the monstrous, disruptive presence of misfits and outsiders within middle class neighborhoods, who shatter the divisions assumed by Jurca, Wilhite, and Beauka. Tongson observes the postwar suburb’s cultural role as that of the “presumed natural habitat for normativity,” reminding readers that inside its “tidy yet nebulous sprawl, even

this representational field has been marred by strange and wild things growing where they shouldn't" (5). According to Murphy, these "invasions" lend themselves to horror stories that manifest the "darker, and no less visible, parallel narrative which bore much in common with those which had from the outset shadowed the American dream of progress and optimism: one which perceived suburbia as the physical personification of all that was wrong with American society, a deadening assembly of identikit houses and a breeding ground for discontent and mindless conventionality" (5). Likewise, Tongson's queer theory schema translates these interruptions into a type of revelation and release, highlighting the movements and collisions as different people interact together, a picture best captured by the "pleasure and thrill in the dangerous transaction" of driving through a cloverleaf intersection, "the elaborate dance between drivers destined for different directions, yet forced by design to notice one another as if their lives depended on it, because they do for that instant" (8).

Against these transitional metaphors, *Neighborhood Associations* looks at the surprisingly static aspects of suburban fiction. I do not mean those who are mired or caught, like the unhappy Wheelers of *Revolutionary Road* or Harry Angstrom's running in place, but the inescapable "here-ness" of people living and dwelling together, the Heideggarian being-with-others (*Mitsein*) that permeates these stories. My shift in perspective provides another counter-narrative to the forms of community diagnosed by other readers of suburban fiction; where Jurca's "victimization narratives," Tongson's normativity, and Wilhite's globalizing regionalism all emphasize the need for security, they overlook the degree to which this safety is achieved through homogenizing forces.

Indeed, mainstays of suburban imagery such as the Home Owner's Association, gated communities, or even the ever-present nosy neighbor all indicate an incessant push of conformity that has been endemic to American suburbs long before either World War. The increased diversification of suburbia has only increased this need for homogeneity, as relatively arbitrary, economically motivated designations – those blocked from neighborhoods “were undesirable because the subdividers branded them undesirable” – have been exacerbated by the desire for safety, thereby heightening the “deep-seated fears that were embodied in [such restrictions] – the fear of others” (Fogelson 123).⁵ Suburban fictions, including television series *Suburgatory*, Joe Dante's farcical movie *The 'burbs*, or Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* feature plots driven by the tension caused by this integration, telling stories in which distinctions diminish when people share proximity.

Hosts, Hostility, and the Hospitality Imperative

Of course, mere spatial arrangements are hardly sufficient to overcome the antagonism endemic to most forms of community, particularly in the modern suburb, which is unquestionably a product of its Cold War milieu. Despite the influence of Eisenhower-era politics, the conflation between community and exclusivity has been posited long before either the U.S. or the Soviet Union were formed, and tracing their development reveals the assumptions about identity against which suburban fiction situates its critical hospitality. This genealogy refocuses the stakes of neighborhood exclusion and attempts to form a national ethos from just “dispossession” or frightening

stories, to a larger problem of diminished selfhood and political violence. Communal homogeneity has been a constant in Western philosophical and religious thought, from Plato's ideal republic and Aristotle's essential ethics to early Christian and Jewish enclaves to the teleological genealogies of civilization posited by Locke, Mill, and Montesquieu.⁶ Whatever their monist or pluralist convictions, each of these thinkers gropes for some unifying factor and means of avoidance to quite literally de-fine the community, repeating and reinforcing the classical *oikos* and *polis* pairing.

Ferdinand Tönnies's late 19th century sociological study *Community and Civil Society* most effectively captures the modern narrative of community, plotting the development of "traditional" *Gemeinschaft* and the rise of industrialized *Gesellschaft*, or civil society. Tönnies draws a strict and moral distinction between the two, positioning *Gemeinschaft* as a true community, formed through a hierarchy of "close blood relationship and mixture of blood, then on spatial proximity, and finally, for human beings, on mental and spiritual closeness."⁷ Conversely, where *Gemeinschaft* is the ideal community, bound by a "mutual understanding between those who love each other," members of a *Gesellschaft* "remain separate in spite of everything that unites them" (34, 52). Underscoring the influence of Marx on his thought, Tönnies describes *Gesellschaft* as a "negative" state, in which capital and, more specifically, contract reduces all interactions to a means of exchange, in which "[n]obody wants to do anything for anyone else, nobody wants to yield or give anything unless he gets something in return that he regards as at least an *equal* trade-off" (52). More than mere antagonism, however, *Gesellschaft* is in many ways the Rousseauist society governed by a contract, where

members are no longer similar in terms of unified spirit, but by agreed-upon norms, a “common good” that exists “by means of a fiction on the part of the individuals concerned” that exists “in the simple act of giving and receiving an object, because during this process contact takes place and common ground emerges which is sought by both parties” (53). Tönnies’s separate spheres and origin myths remain potent today, and one can find elements of them in modern thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman.⁸ Each theorist assumes the existence of a prior, more “authentic” community that allowed for security and nourishment, dashed against the new, heartless modernity.

The figure of the stranger or enemy reappears throughout Tönnies’s history of community and civil society, sometimes as a knowledge “possessed” by the members and other times as a guest to be conditionally welcomed (36). For Tönnies, the stranger serves to solidify the common and to draw individuals together according to their mutual dislike of this outsider. Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, with chilling clarity and logical precision, takes this correlation between the *Vaterland* and the invader to its furthest logical conclusion, defending the Third Reich and its ultimate manifestation in the holocaust by expounding on the very communal and political ideologies espoused not only by Tönnies, but by Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, and other Enlightenment stalwarts. According to Schmitt, the idea of the state presupposes the concept of the political – the interactions with others inherent to the polis – and the political is defined by the friend/enemy distinction. Although ultimately determined by the sovereign, the

friend/enemy designation is made daily by ordinary members of the community, an act that

denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or disassociation. It can exist theoretically and practically, without having simultaneously to draw upon all those moral, aesthetic, economic, or other distinctions. The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in a specially intense way, existentially something different and alien, so that in the extreme case conflicts with him are possible. These can neither be decided by a previously determined general norm nor by the judgment of a disinterested and therefore neutral third party. (26-27)

The decision, Schmitt repeatedly insists, is a necessary requirement for security, which is the ultimate end of the state and the *raison d'être* of the sovereign. But while the sovereign initially determines the enemy and distinguishes his community from others, the task of applying the decision actually falls to individual citizens, who are in the best “position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent’s way of life and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one’s own form of existence” (27). This notion of one’s “way of life” echoes not only the unity and “spiritual closeness” extolled in Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*, but more hauntingly in the key aspects of suburban ethos. When William Schneider declared in *The Atlantic Monthly* that the third century of American history “is shaping up as the suburban century,” he based his claim on the extent to which the residential model means “the privatization of American life and culture.” Furthermore, the specter of war that gave birth to the suburban model – as evidenced by the GIs who initially embraced the geography, by its position as

paradigmatic American way of life opposed to socialist communes, and by the fear of violence that motivated white flight – reinforces Schmitt’s insistence on the practicality of the decision. The concepts of the friend or enemy have meaning “precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing” and “remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid” (33). Suburbia was founded on the reality of the enemy, of the barbarian in the city, and the “inevitability” of killing – in the proliferation of private firearm ownership to defend one’s family, in the erection of gates and employment of private security firms, in the covenants that determine who may live within a neighborhood – and continues to operate according to the friend/enemy distinction.

But suburban fiction rarely offers such a stark contrast between insider and outsider. Although recent popular culture has embraced the “secret suburban enemy” trope – television series *Breaking Bad* and *Weeds* both feature drug kingpins masquerading as domesticated husbands and homemakers, and films *Disturbia* and *Arlington Road* derive tension from terrorists and murders living next door – literary fiction tends to take a more nuanced approach, positing instead porous identity boundaries. Such instances are frequent in *Linden Hills*, but none so powerful as the tragic tale of Laurel Dumont – a career woman who, after her husband divorces her and she is evicted from the neighborhood, commits suicide by diving into an empty swimming pool. References to water and music abound in her story, but they never correspond to a single phenomenon or idea, which illustrates the fluid and transitional nature of Laurel’s ipsiety. For instance, young Laurel found tranquility in her

grandmother Roberta's pond, so when she moved into her husband's well-furnished house in Linden Hills, she asserts some control over the space by "fill[ing] it with the only two things she could honestly associate with home ... she turned the den into a music room and installed a diving pool" (232). By terraforming her husband's property to build the pool, Laurel links her affluent house to her grandmother's rural shack, which not only undoes the strict demarcations on which the neighborhood is built, but also complicates any firm notion of belonging. Furthermore, despite the sense of control and freedom Laurel experiences when swimming, water also foretells her eventual death, a signification recognized by Roberta when a pre-teen Laurel brings her grandmother to the pond to demonstrate a synchronized swimming routine. Where, for Laurel, the water "rewarded every perfect twist and turn by keeping her afloat, keeping her moving, and keeping her free," Roberta gasps in horror when her granddaughter "disappeared under a surface that gave almost no evidence it had been disturbed" (223). Indeed, throughout her story, Laurel refuses to notice the danger Roberta correlates with water: as a child, she insisted that she "can't drown" because her father told her she "was his brown sugar baby. And sugar don't drown... it melts in the water and makes it sweet." When Roberta prophetically warns, "You could break your neck" by diving into shallow water, Laurel only responds, "Oh no, not in the water" (217, 224). Technically, Laurel is not wrong – she broke her neck when diving into the pool precisely because there was no water; however, it was her belief in her ability, in her faith in the presence of her Grandmother's idyllic pond within Linden Hills, that ultimately pushed her in. She mistook danger for security, and – in Schmittian terms – she failed to make the correct decision.

The symbolic variability of water, and the insecure, amorphous identity it portends, troubles the solidarity demanded by Tönnies and Schmitt, as the very element that defines Laurel and gives her agency is the same that kills her. This development foregrounds death's inescapable inevitability, but it is not the same inevitability described by Schmitt, as it is not located in an enemy who can be destroyed or killed. Rather, Laurel's story – like most of those in *Linden Hills*, and in fact most suburban fictions – refuses such flat reductions of selfhood; time and again, the guest who is welcomed is revealed to be different than he or she who was initially expected, revealing – as Naylor does here with her water imagery – the self to be fluid, and societies of the same undone. Naylor's narrator emphasizes the solitary nature of Laurel's listening habits, through which she transcends the provincial roots associated with her Grandmother's blues music and also shields herself from others; within her hermetic music room, "She couldn't hear the doors slam ... And she couldn't hear the file of visitors who came all through the late autumn: her father, half-sister, and stepmother. The neighbors from Tupelo Drive mouthing concern or curiosity above the volume of her music until they tired of the competition and went away" (234). As this passage indicates, music is, for Laurel, integral to the process of identity construction and, not incidentally, completely solitary, but – recalling the relational nature of Grandma Tilson's "silver mirror" – Naylor once again troubles this distinction with Roberta's recognition that Mahler and Muddy Waters are simultaneously "in the same world" and inherently different:

They all trying to say something with music that you can't say with plain talk. There ain't really no words for love or pain ... You can hear the hurt in Bessie or Billie and I just kinda wish that I'd come here and found you playing their stuff,

‘cause that man you seem to like so much — that Mahler — his music says that he ain’t made peace with his pain, child. And if you gonna go on, that’s what you gotta do. (235)

The concordance and contradiction Roberta finds in these vastly disparate artists undermines the solitary persona Laurel hopes to construct. As with the conflation of water with freedom and death, the relation between Mahler and Muddy rejects the types of binaries associated with Romantic societies, refiguring the nature of community from a strict set of norms and regulations to something more transformative, where unknowable members relate and respond with no guarantee of safety.

Against the demand for security through exclusion, then, suburban fictions more often operate according to a logic of critical hospitality, in which the welcomed other undoes the distinction between guest and host, becoming ontologically hostile. The notion of hospitality, of course, has a long literary and philosophical history, perhaps demonstrated earliest in the ancient Greek concept of *xenia* or guest-relation. *Xenia* requires hosts to treat guests with respect and care, as illustrated in Homer’s *Odyssey* when Odysseus receives hospitality from the Egyptian king he has invaded because the king “feared the wrath of Zeus, the god of guests” (14.318). But while *xenia* may, on the surface, appear open and welcoming, it cannot be neglected that its “duties are conceived of in astonishingly uniform term: it is as if everyone recognized how a *xenos* should behave in each specific situation;” hospitality, according to this law, is only to be given by the host and received only by the stranger, thereby reifying their roles (Herman 118). In the same way the “ethos of *xenia* revolved around the twin poles of idealism and instrumentality,” Kant’s modern reassertion of the importance of hospitality is based on

similar assumptions and applications (121). In his brief essay “Perpetual Peace,” Kant positions “universal hospitality” as a means for avoiding hostilities in an increasingly cosmopolitan world:⁹ when “a stranger” arrives “on someone else’s territory,” Kant declares, he has “the right ... not to be treated with hostility” (105). Like *xenia*, Kant’s universal hospitality is primarily a traveler’s welcome, offered with the assumption of transience and not permanence: the stranger “can indeed be turned away, if this can be done without causing his death, but he must not be treated with hostility, so long as he behaves in a peaceable manner in the place he happens to be in” (106). Appropriately enough, Kant’s explanation rests on two significant *prioris*: it assumes the right of property for the host as the one who determines acceptance and rejection, and it sets forth a very limited understanding of “safety” for the stranger. The stranger, then, is not so much accepted as he is allowed to stay with some provisions, because he “may only claim a *right of resort*” – to “present themselves in the society of others” – but may not “claim the *right of a guest* to be entertained, for this would require a special friendly agreement whereby he might become a member of the native household for a certain time” (106).¹⁰ Kant’s theory keeps the barbarian/citizen distinction intact, putting priority not on place but on ownership,¹¹ and imposing a contractual set of requirements: the stranger remains a stranger while in the place that belongs to someone else, and must not disturb the assumptions or beliefs of the host, but must accept the presented roles while briefly sharing space.

As we have already seen, the critical hospitality prevalent in suburban fiction often upsets contracts by refusing to cohere predetermined roles by describing people

who stay together and dwell beside one another. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the conversation directly preceding Laurel's suicide, in which Luther Nedeed visits to announce her eviction. Given the neighborhood's emphasis on representation – "somehow making it into Linden Hills meant 'making it'" – one would assume that Laurel is an exemplary member of Luther's community; she did, after all, rise above her upbringing to lead "a whole division of men at IBM," and her love of music and athletic prowess makes her the perfect combination of class and physical ability (15, 240). However, acting like Schmitt's sovereign, Luther decides that Laurel is an enemy and, therefore, must be removed, a decree he makes while maintaining an air of reserved sympathy, suggesting that he is helpless to violate the contract their predecessors signed. Accordingly, the contract then serves as a type of *priori*, an agreement made by the ancestors of Luther and Laurel's ex-husband, and as a marker of identity: as a descendent of the Nedeeds, Luther is a citizen of Linden Hills *par exemplar*, while Laurel's loss of Dumont status makes her a *xenos* or barbarian. Luther emphasizes her transient position by repeatedly inquiring about Laurel's "personal plans to vacate" and relies on predeterminations when he explains that such agreements are "the way things have always been here" (244). Intended to be the final word on their dispute, Luther's statement in fact draws attention to the persistence of place within their argument, as his appeal to precedence is inextricably tied to space on which it is applied. Laurel invokes this spatial fact when arguing against Luther, asserting her right to remain on the grounds that she holds the grounds; when she maintains that "this Dumont is telling [Luther] that she's going to stay here," she upholds the primacy of place, defining herself according to

her “here”-ness instead of her designation as a (ex)Dumont. Moreover, the argument ends on spatial terms when Laurel avers the power of her face-to-face relationship with Luther as the strongest defense against the Nedeed contract: “There is no way that this conversation is taking place in my living room, with this man looking me straight in the face and telling me that I don’t exist. That I don’t live in this house” (245). Laurel’s complaint attempts to undo the priority of Luther’s contract, insisting that predetermined agreement forged by those long gone over the needs of the one who faces him is a tantamount to an impossibility, to suggesting she does not exist.

Although she never uses the word, Laurel’s demand is, at its core, one for hospitality: she recognizes that Luther has the rights and the power, and yet still persists on staying. As highlighted by the frequent references to place and proximity, Laurel is not a traveler or a *xenos*, nor is she a guest attempting to present herself in the society of others; she is a resident whose staying rejects the conditions that Luther has put on her. This requirement for “unconditional hospitality” cannot be explained in the contractual terms traditionally associated with suburbia, but in the radical deconstruction explored in Jacques Derrida’s essay “On Hospitality.”¹² Derrida draws his notion of the unconditional by troubling the prime distinction assumed in *xenia* and by Kant – that between the host, sovereign in his or her ability to grant welcome, and the guest. This sovereignty posits a certain inviolability of the home, over which the homeowner maintains control; however, the authority on which the homeowner relies is, as Derrida points out, ultimately already violated, as it is the power of the state whose laws grant the homeowner the right to welcome or refuse. Moreover, the very knowledge of the right is

contingent upon the presence of the guest or foreigner whose presence prompts the question of welcome or expulsion. Accordingly, Derrida argues, the question of hospitality becomes “the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question” because the one requesting aid, “putting the first question, puts me in question” (3). So, ultimately, hospitality “is due to the foreigner, certainly, but remains, like the law, conditional, and thus conditioned in its dependence on the unconditionality that is the basis of the law” (73). This presence of the guest necessarily involves a “transgressive step,” an impossibility in which “the stranger or foreigner held the keys” to the house, revealing an always implicit reversal:

It’s *as if* (and an *as if* always lays down the law here) the stranger ... could save the master and liberate the power of his host; it’s *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage). So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage - and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host’s host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*). These substitutions make everyone into everyone else’s hostage. (123)

“Such are the laws of hospitality,” Derrida claims; substitutions that make “everyone into everyone else’s hostage” (125). The laws of hospitality by which the guest and host assert and assume certain roles already contain the fragments of their undoing, which can never be exterminated or expelled. Hospitality then is already implied by the mere proximity of others, and this implication undoes any binary – host/guest, friend/enemy, citizen/barbarian – exceeding all designations until all that is left are two people, sharing space in a face-to-face relation.

Facing the Neighbor

As numerous readers, including Derrida himself, have noted, this mode of thought is heavily indebted to the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, whose first major work *Totality and Infinity* was described by Derrida as “an immense treatise on hospitality” (*Adieu* 49). Posited as a correction to Heidegger’s phenomenology, which defines the self as constructed in relation to the present and factual, Levinas insists on the priority of ethics before ontology. Where Heidegger’s phenomenology reduces to a division between ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) objects that one might use unreflectively and present-to-hand (*vorhanden*) objects that one ponders, Levinas claims that such a model becomes totalitarian when applied to real people. Levinas describes this totalizing figure, which collapses all other people and objects into extensions of the self, as “the Same:”

To be I is, over and beyond any individuation that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one’s content. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification. (*Totality* 36)

Against the domineering Same, Levinas posits the interruption of the other, who arrives to the Same both as an object and as a surprise that exceeds expectation.¹³ In Levinas’s phenomenology, the Same’s totality becomes disrupted by an encounter with the other’s face, which is the sensible manifestation of that person. The face serves as an object for the Same to recognize, while also suggesting an infinite interiority; it is “[t]he way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (50).¹⁴ This exceedance disturbs the Same, shattering epistemological assumptions and the other –

whether she or he is a friend or enemy, a civilian or barbarian – becomes the one who “is above all the one I am responsible for” (*Entre Nous* 105). As Derrida puts it, “Levinas wants to remind us that responsibility is not at first responsibility of myself for myself, that the sameness of myself is derived from the other, as if it were second to the other, coming to itself as responsible and mortal from the position of my responsibility before the other, for the other’s death and in the face of it.” (*Gift of Death* 46). And yet is this very condition that makes the Same “able to respond,” a point he states in uncharacteristically blunt fashion while speaking of Heidegger’s relationship of recognition, explaining that “to be human means to have a responsibility for the other.”

The other is properly nothing to me. In French, this is expressed well: *il n’est rien pour moi, il ne me regarde pas* (he is nothing to me, he does not concern me). This ‘not-concerning-me’ is the non-human. The human enters into being in order to say the ontological absurdity: the other *does* concern me, the death of the other *does* concern me. (Robbins, “Being-Toward-Death” 132)

The response demanded forms the prime ethical moment, in which the Same must decide to either objectify the other by enfolding the interruption into his or her predeterminations – an act of totalizing objectification that Levinas compares to “murder” – or by welcoming even the unknowable and potentially dangerous other, caring for him or her by refusing to impose limitations.

Because it presents an ethical imperative that cannot be simplified to a contractual agreement or even a moral good – indeed, it is no law that commands response, but the naked openness of the other’s face – Levinas’s ethical imperative requires a reconceptualization of suburbia as a setting for stories about individuals interacting with

one another. Accordingly, the fictions studied in *Neighborhood Associations* imagine suburbia not as a place of homogeny or affluence, but as a space where individuals face one another. This approach follows what has been called a “spatial turn” in literary criticism, answering the work done by critics including Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre, and Fredric Jameson to explore the process of “cognitive mapping” inherent to the reading process.¹⁵ These readers claim that the spatial relationships represented in literary works undermine what Jameson calls the globalizing impulse of late-capitalist postmodernism, which puts an end to “the bourgeois ego, or monad” and replaces it with free-floating and impersonal “euphoria.” The literary critic, Jameson insists, can no longer focus on “the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality,” but must attend to the “categories of space” where the self is situated (*Postmodernism* 16-17). But as illustrated in Jameson or Michel de Certeau, this mapping often valorizes the role of perceiving subject over the perceived object, the work of the all-comprehending Same about which Levinas writes. Tellingly, this spatial egoism lends itself best to the modernist space *par exemplar*, the big city, whether it be the major American cities from which Jameson (via Kevin Lynch) launches his argument or Certeau’s “Concept-city,” a place of “transformations and appropriations, the object of various kinds of interference but also a subject that is constantly enriched by new attributes” (94). These theorists posit the city as their model, describing the “tactics” – the “calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality” – as a means for making meaning (xix). Suburban fiction, conversely, troubles this “reconquest” (to use Jameson’s term) by throwing its central

characters into explicitly occupied space; so while Certeau might praise the “walker” as a Bahktinian polyglot whose “enunciative” step variously “affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, [and] respects” as it “speaks,” suburban fiction often eschews a clear authoritative figure against whom one must resist (99). True, suburbs are administrative spaces, but its regulations are imposed less by stoplights and traffic cops and more by neighbors attempting to censure one another, resulting in failures of control that give rise to new, contingent relationships that operate otherwise than an administrator/pedestrian conflict.

They better embody Agamben’s notion of “taking space,” the ethical imperative that operates outside the logic of antagonism by recognizing the co-existence of manifold potentialities in a single place. Within what Agamben calls “easement,” the ethical self posits an identity by making room for the neighbor, and as such, goodness allows for “exteriority and non-latency” to be “the determination and the limit of every thing,” while evil is “the reduction of the taking-place of things to a fact like others, the forgetting of the transcendence inherent in the very taking-place of things” (14). Where urban walking rarely becomes more than a “rhetoric,” a “process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian,” the being-with and taking-place prominent in suburban fiction allows no rhetorical manipulation or appropriation (Certeau 101, 98). The relationship demands a response that returns the “free *use of the self*” back to the neighbor/guest, treating existence not “as a property” but as “a *habitus*, an *ethos*” (*Coming Community* 27-28).

Consider the cognitive mapping that occurs in the climactic scene of *Linden Hills*, in which Willie and Lester are hired by Luther Nedeed to decorate his house for Christmas, and find themselves witnessing Willa's mad escape from the basement and her destruction of the Nedeed house. Throughout the scene, Naylor draws attention to spatial arrangements, beginning with Lester's declaration that Luther Nedeed's house at the bace of the subdivision represents "the end of Linden Hills" (283). The claim has multiple valances: it is a pun on the novel's material reality, as the statement occurs nineteen pages from the end of the book; it indicates ultimate goal of the neighborhood – the autonomy and power enjoyed by the Nedeeds, while also ironically noting that this affluence is contained in a house that was "unbelievably simple compared to the ones farther up"; it acknowledges that the house doubles as the local funeral home (despite his power as a broker, Luther's primary vocation is that of a mortician) where residents will ultimately be buried; finally, most strikingly, Lester's observation foretells the mayhem that is about to occur, tying the destruction of the house (and the last generation of Luther Nedeeds along with it) to a denial of the exclusionary "fence logic" Nedeed tries to impose (283). Once inside the house, Luther once again attempts to take control by asserting contractually defined roles – he of the employer and the boys as hired servants – a point he makes by explicitly directing Willie and Lester throughout his rooms, telling them where they should go to retrieve the decorations and where they should be placed. And yet, even as he positions sovereignty over his property, Luther is aware of the space's rejection: even though he "knew every plane of that room, every irregular surface, each crack and stain in the wood," Luther still sensed that the "silent and

shadowed room threatened to rise up and condemn him” (285). The presence of others only exacerbates Luther’s sense of dislocation, particularly as the boys disrupt Luther’s control. Some of these disturbances are unquestionably intentional – when Lester compares Luther’s tree and ornament to his own, he does so to obliterate Luther’s façade of civility and superiority – but more often they are accidents, such as the near-shattering of a prized ornament or the great discomfort Luther feels about “strangers in his home ... handling ornaments that belonged to his family” (293). The simple proximity of Luther, Lester, and Willie calls for a reconceptualization of the space they share, making Luther’s house into a type of “easement” as described by Agamben, an “unrepresentable space” or “empty place where each can move freely, in a semantic constellation” (*Coming Community* 25).

This spatial refiguring is most pronounced when the decorating session is interrupted by Willa’s emergence from the basement – driven crazy from spending days with her dead son and from reading the memoirs of mistreated wives of previous Luther Nedeads – and her destruction of the house. Naylor skillfully teases Willa’s position throughout the scene, making her a type of worm in Luther’s well-controlled root, but this position is not a simple administrative resistance in the sense intended by Certeau, nor is her flight up the stairs a type of “enunciative” walking; rather, Willa’s movement is decidedly domestic, as she first cleans the basement before leaving, and then moves to the kitchen to begin doing the dishes. Like Laurel Dumont, she is not a traveler seeking temporary safety, but a resident who is occupying space, demanding a hospitality that she knows her husband cannot give her. She was “programed with a purpose,” and her

single-minded pursuit of that purpose – she cleans until she pushes Luther into the candles on the tree, catching the house on fire and killing them both – eases away (in Agamben’s sense of the word) old, hierarchical forms of relation (298). In the same way that “her body [is] a mere shelter for the mating of unfathomable will to unfathomable possibility,” her presence makes Luther’s house strange and full of wild potential (288). It (a)voids the contracts and prior assumptions that Luther has used to control others, the essentialisms that designated him Luther Nedeed in the tradition of his fathers and grandfathers and her just another woman to bear the next Luther Nedeed, and compels him to relate and to respond. Willa’s emergence is not simply a spatial remapping, then, a convergence from the fundement into the main space of Linden Hills – but a radical affirmation of proximity. She disrupts the three men and forces them to face her, shattering prior assumptions of civility and order and forcing a responsibility: Luther can no longer ignore her in the basement, nor can Willie and Lester work for Luther under the pretenses of money. They must face her and respond.

For Lester, the destruction of the Nedeed house opens up a “middle ground,” freeing him from the “Linden Hills or nothing” ethos that has dominated his life; it presents a different form of relation than the logic of fences that served as a leitmotif for the novel (283). This rejection of fences nicely mirrors the eventual destruction of the house and its purpose and asserts a different type of spatial arrangement, one that cannot be enunciative or appropriative, but must be inoperative or unavowable. Instead of the Romantic forms of community assumed in suburbia, the types of community imagined by stories like *Linden Hills* and, in fact, all of those found in this study require a different

terminology, something otherwise than the security-minded divisions that spawned the space. I find this terminology in recent continental philosophy, particularly the notion of the singularity, as described variously in works such as Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (and its spiritual successor, Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy), as well as Agamben's *The Coming Community*.¹⁶ Against the Schmittian communities of sameness implied by standard approaches to suburbia, these thinkers emphasize contingency and unknowability, arguing that the friend/enemy distinction that has been inherent to Western philosophy will inevitably lead to holocaust, as indicated by Agamben's claim that "it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (*Homo Sacer* 181). Following the Levinasian priority of ethics over ontology, Derrida, Nancy, and Agamben attempt to uncover community founded on difference, which forgoes the absolute security that Schmitt desires. In fact, much of *The Politics of Friendship* directly disputes Schmitt's concept of politics by exploring assumptions that motivate our friendship decisions. Noting that Schmitt implies that "[a]s soon as war is possible, it is taking place" and indicating that his theories work to close off potentiality, Derrida reveals that Schmitt's thought in fact relies on a lack of security (86). This insecurity allows Derrida to highlight not only the constructed nature of friendships – as indicated by the references to our choosing, numbering, and qualifying our friends – but also the lack of distinction between friend and enemy. "If *the* political is to exist," Derrida notes, "one must know who everyone is, who is a friend and who is an enemy, and this knowing is not in the mode of theoretical knowledge but in one of a *practical*

identification: knowing consists here in knowing how to identify the friend and the enemy” (116). However, the fact that Schmitt offers the possibility of neutrality, in which the enemy is eliminated and the friend is no longer distinguishable, and that the enemy is not necessarily always inherently an enemy – “For Schmitt, the criterion of the friend/enemy distinction does not in fact entail that a ‘determined people’ should have to be for all eternity the friend or the enemy of another. This suggests that the ‘decision’ we have been talking about is not linked to communal appurtenance, is not caused by it, even though the decision reaffirms appurtenance” (127) – precludes any clear distinction between friend and enemy. As with the fluid identities found in Laurel Dumont’s story, friends are always potential enemies. A friendship that refuses these demarcations, then, must be willing to sacrifice the friendship, resulting in a contingent and non-totalizing society that Derrida calls a “singularity.”

The notion of singularity found in Derrida and others is based solely on the face-to-face relation and the radical hospitality it requires. It follows Roberto Esposito’s attempts to think community not as “a quality that is added to [member’s] nature as subjects,” leaving literal ground as the only ground, the shared space of those in proximity (2). Indeed, as Nancy and Blanchot or Hardt and Negri insist, the singular community must be “inoperative” or “unavowable,” not designed to achieve a particular goal; a singularity is “a new type of communication that functions not on the basis of resemblances but on the bases of differences” (*Empire* 57). These “whatever communities,” as Agamben calls them – in which “whatever” denotes not “indifference” but “non-determination” – best defend the infinite potentiality of its members: “For if it is

true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence.” A “whatever singularity,” therefore “has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities” (*Coming Community* 34, 66). Such a model directly repudiates both the ethos of planned communities found in real suburbs and the for/against binaries assumed by many readers of suburban fictions. Stories like *Linden Hills*, I argue, trouble the barbarian/citizen division, as displayed when Willie and Lester witness Willa’s improper behavior: the roles that brought the young men to the Nedeed house are discarded in the face of the mad Willa emerging from the basement and from the great horror Luther expresses. They no longer relate on the level of employer and employee, of homeowner and guest, but as infinite human sharing space with human, and their reactions are wild, untameable.

Chapter Summaries

As I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, such communities are far more common to suburban fiction than the predetermined associations most frequently related to the genre. Throughout these stories, contracts are discarded and destroyed in the face of the ineffable and unknowable other, but the result is not simply horror or movement or dispossession; rather, in the same way Willie and Lester stay in the neighborhood to

witness and engage, most suburban fictions feature a being-with and dwelling together that results in an inoperable community defined only by the presence of the moment. According to Sue-Im Lee, such relationships are increasingly common to American fiction; where American authors once subscribed to a dichotomy between individual and society, contemporary writers express more of an ambivalence toward the prospects of community. Longing for the benefits offered by an ideal community while avoiding the restrictions and limitations imposed on individuals, these authors seek a community that maintains the “paradoxes, impossibilities, and contradictions” of a “dialectic community without synthesis” (3). Lee finds that many contemporary novels offer a vision of community that neither fully endorses nor fully embraces idealized community, but rather expresses ambivalence toward it: “To be ambivalent is to simultaneously entertain two contradictory attitudes toward one concept. Put another way, ambivalence describes a unique vantage point, of acknowledging the appeal, as well as the undesirability, of any alternative” (21). Rather than be completely “given over” to a particular idea, Lee argues that contemporary novelists offer a deliberative form of community, in which individuals consciously enter into relations with other individuals, willingly accepting the responsibilities this entails while simultaneously holding out the possibility to reject it.

To interpret this ambivalence in suburban fiction and to uncover the critical hospitality that occurs so often, I follow the recent “ethical turn” in literary criticism. A development of the deconstruction and reader-response theories that flourished in the 1970s, narrative ethics combines the two central questions of those disciplines: like deconstruction, it asks “what can we know?” and like reader response, it asks “what can

we do?” Accordingly, narrative ethics insists that stories have a reflexive function, that they affect not only the way we understand ourselves and others, but they motivate our actual dealings with flesh-and-blood people in the real world. But unlike standard reader-response criticism, narrative ethics couples its correspondence between the literary and real worlds with Lee’s sense of nervousness, an understanding that even fictional characters exceed the reader’s interpretive grasp. According to Andrew Gibson, this exceedance is a key element of ethical response, avoiding the totalization common in some forms of narrative, where the narrator—or person ordering the narrative through interpretation — “takes another, others, the world as the object or objects of knowledge and claims possession of them” (26).¹⁷ Adam Zachary Newton’s study *Narrative Ethics* makes the connections all the more clear, outlining a process of interpretation that allows a reader to face a text “as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning” (11). These approaches recall a number of developments in later reception and narrative theory,¹⁸ which emphasize the problematic aspects of a text in relation to its ability to help the reader interact in the real world and to understand real others. As such, these readings unavoidably involve what Jameson called the “political unconscious,” the idea that reoccurring plots and tropes, which he calls “master narratives,” have “inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signified are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (*Political Unconscious* 34). Jameson’s concerns are

particularly notable in relation to suburban fiction, as both the space and the identities of those within has been heavily influenced and motivated by narratives. But where suburban communal myths often reduced to variations of citizen/barbarian distinctions – whether they located that barbarian inside or outside the suburb – the fictions studied in *Neighborhood Associations* call for something more contingent and varied, an interpretive process well-suited to narrative ethics.

I organize my project according to the groups formed by suburbanites, moving from the largest to the smallest and presumably most secure. My first chapter, “Nowhere to Now Here: Contract Versus Relation in Suburbia,” analyzes narratives that juxtapose the suburbs against other sites of contact, particularly the city. Correlating the expectations suburbanites hold for one another to the regulations imposed by Home Owners’ Associations, and tracing that phenomenon to the liberal thought of social contract theorists like Rousseau, I examine three novels that reject the irresponsibility of contractual relationships and envision the suburbs as fraught and messy heterotopias: Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, John Cheever’s *Bullet Park*, and Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*. Drawing from Heidegger’s redefinition of Rousseauist authenticity – from a solipsistic egoism to a recognition of the present and factual – I argue that these novels describe social contracts as not only untenable, but ultimately unsatisfying and undesirable. In their place, Yates, Cheever, and Ford portray associations based on hospitality for the infinite other in proximity.

Contractualism underpins Western assumptions about private property, which are integral to the development of the modern suburb. Chapter two, “Not in My Backyard:

Private Property and the Neighbor in the Suburban Imagination,” addresses two dominant property discourses: the classical liberal theories of Locke and Kant, which advocate property as a form of protection from invaders, and the concept of dwelling articulated in Heidegger and Arendt, which posits property as a means for developing an isolated identity. Contrasting these approaches to the interactions found in T. C. Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain*, Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, and John Updike’s *Rabbit Redux*, I argue that both philosophies position neighbors as potential enemies, unnecessary and detrimental to one’s subjectivity. I contend that the relationships characterized by these novelists can be better described by employing the redefinitions asserted by Kenneth Reinhardt, Eric L. Santer, and Jeremy Waldron. According to these thinkers, the neighbor is not an individual similar to the self, but an other who is in proximity and in need. Following the notions of improper property advanced in Levinas and Esposito, I argue that the houses in Boyle, Lee, and Updike are not fortresses that exclude, but sites of welcome for the potentially dangerous, but ultimately necessary, neighbor.

It is impossible to envision suburbia’s uniform houses without also picturing happy husbands and wives living inside them; and yet, suburban fictions feature suffocating gender roles and escape through extramarital affairs far more frequently than they do couples living in connubial bliss. My third chapter, “Forsaking All Others: Marriage, Monogamy, and Obligation,” examines three portrayals of marriage: a revolt against traditional contracts in Tom Perrotta’s *Little Children*, a critique of adultery in Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*, and a relationship based on impossible promises in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*. These novels struggle to illustrate a type of responsible freedom,

a union that differs from both the fear-motivated Eisenhower-era “traditional” marriage and the egoism inherent to the free love advocated by thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari. These novels demonstrate what Jean-Luc Nancy called “shattered love,” a relationship based on obligation to an unknowable other to whom one is joined in wedlock.

Although developers and advertisers have often used pictures of childhood to promise safety in the suburbs, a great many suburban fictions involve child death or endangerment plots. In my fourth chapter “Domesticated Strangers: Children and Alterity,” I argue that the prevalence of these images indicates an anxiety about western child rearing practices. These methods too often collapse the child into an extension of the parent, resulting in what Deleuze and Guattari call “the Oedipal triangle.” Sometimes, as in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, this difference creates fear for one’s offspring; elsewhere, the child’s profound unknowability inspires fictions about deadly adolescents, such as “child-murderer” Richard Everett of Joyce Carol Oates’s *Expensive People*. Against these pessimistic characterizations, I insist that stories about the child’s otherness opens the space for ethical community. Most childhood narratives gesture toward this association through difference, including *Garp* and *Expensive People*, but is particularly clear in the mythical Lisbon girls of Jeffery Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*. Contrary to the myth of nostalgic youth that subjects offspring to such scrutiny, I argue that their great alterity shatters previous beliefs and opens the way for a more contingent form of association.

I close my study by looking at the international implications of the postwar suburb. As vividly illustrated by Richard Nixon’s 1959 “Kitchen Debate” with Soviet

Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the suburb has become the physical manifestation of the American Dream and a demonstration of exceptionalism for the rest of the world. Accordingly, some immigrants and ethnic groups traditionally excluded from the American community see suburbia as a means to achieving their American Dream, resulting in tensions that have been explored by recent novelists. For example, the Jewish residents in Philip Roth's Weequahic stories might create their own version of the sitcom suburb in hopes of enjoying U.S. culture while protecting their national identities, but novels like *American Pastoral* and *Nemesis* frame the enclave as prohibitive and therefore untenable, just like its WASP counterpart. Conversely, Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* emphasizes the plurality of its neighborhood, in which Mona Chang triangulates her identity in relation to those in proximity: her Chinese parents, her Japanese love interest, her Jewish friends, and her African-American coworkers. By rejecting the notion of a monolithic American character, these stories reaffirm the potential for ethics in suburbia, positioning it as a space for not only cosmopolitan contact, but for the conflicts and interrupts essential to subjectivity.

As my readings will demonstrate, these texts repeatedly reject or avoid the citizen/barbarian distinction traditionally central to the American suburb. In doing so, they will address the question central to Cavafy's poem: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?" Indeed, without a clear "them" provided by their enemies, modern suburbanites are forced to rethink the "us," which has been thrown into dissolution. But unlike the marauders in the poem, suburbia's barbarians have not simply left the gates – they have entered the neighborhood, bought houses next door, and live

among us: their kids play with our kids, they lawns touch our lawns, their lives are entangled in our lives. By dissolving the divisions, the barbarians and citizens resolve into a new, more contingent us, a new community that needs new myths to describe it. This project argues that these myths are already available in the continuing genre of suburban fiction, stories that show readers the contingent, insecure, but necessarily hospitable associations occurring in neighborhoods across the U.S.

Notes

1 For a powerful study on the influence of television on the development of the suburban imagination, see Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* and Samuels, *Brought to You By*.

2 Although a highly educated author and the winner of several major literary awards, including the Pulitzer and the award of “Poet Laureate,” Van Duyn’s subject matter and focus on suburbia – best exemplified in her 1970 collection *To See, To Take* – has given her a reputation as one devoted to the trite and forgettable, more of a booster of suburbia than a wry observer of it.

3 See Costino, “Weapons Against Women: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Capitalism in Linden Hills;” Goddu, “Reconstructing History in Linden Hills;” Montgomery, *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor*; Okonkwo, “Suicide or Self Sacrifice: Exhuming Willa’s Body in Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills;” Whitt, *Understanding Gloria Naylor*.

4 See Steinmann and Fox, *The Male Dilemma*; Cammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority*; Lemon, *The Troubled American*; Hodgson, *America in Our Time*; Ehenreich, *Fear of Falling*; Warren, *The Radical Center*.

5 Nicolaides and Weise’s *The Suburb Reader* collects a number of documents to construct a powerfully succinct history of CIDs, HOAs, and the legal challenges raised against them. The chapter entitled “Our Town: Inclusion and Exclusion in Recent Suburbia” is of particular interest. See also Lassiter, “Suburban Strategies: The Volatile Center in Postwar American Politics,” and McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*.

6 For a concise comparative outline of these various approaches, see Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*.

7 The narrative of communal development Tönnies outlines in his chapter “The theory of *Gemeinschaft*” recalls Thomas Paine’s island narrative in *Common Sense*, thereby securing the link between the two philosophies and the American mind. Furthermore, as geographers like Jon C. Teaford and Fogelman have observed, the suburb is built on a rhetoric of anti-urban, agrarianism, which often takes a Jeffersonian flair. Jefferson learned his notion of togetherness from Paine, thereby cementing the accord between Tönnies and the suburbs.

8 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Beck, *Risk Society*; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*; and Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

9 While unquestionably the most influential thinker of hospitality in the Enlightenment, Kant is far from the only one working on the topic. See Peter Melville's *Romantic Hospitality and the Resistance to Accommodation*.

10 More recently, cosmopolitan thinkers including Seyla Benhabib, Jürgen Habermas, and K. Anthony Appiah have been adopting Kantian principles to the current moment of late capitalism. See Benhabib, *The Rights of Others*; Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*; Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.

11 Kant's theory of property, as described in the *Groundworks of the Metaphysics of Morals*, conceives of property as not a "right," per se, but as an agreement to limit the freedom of others. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

12 Some readers, most notably Martin Hägglund, have attempted to separate Derrida's later work from Levinas's influence, offering a more "atheistic" version of hospitality in which even the welcome involves an element of violence. See Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*.

13 In its original French, Levinas distinguishes between *autre* and *Autre*, the wholly other and the tangentially other. Most translators mark the distinction by capitalizing the word "other" when describing the tangentially other and "Other" when denoting the wholly other. For the purposes of my study, I am referring solely to the wholly Other, but for the purposes of readability will not be following the capitalization model.

14 My use of the word "object" may be a poor one, and reflects the often contradictory nature of Levinas's philosophy. Hilary Putman's introductory discussion to Levinas's debt to Judaism may help explain the manifestation of the face by reminding the reader that Levinas tends to speak of the Other in terms usually ascribed to God. With that in mind, the face for Levinas is more a "trace," not an actual physical object: "Just as we never see God, but at best traces of God's presence in the world, so we never see the 'face' of the other, but only its 'trace.'" (45).

15 See *Spatiality* by James Talley for an impressively thorough and concise primer on the topic.

16 Maurice Blanchot's *The Unavowable Community* a direct response to Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* and a further discussion of George Bataille's work, is another important work in this conversation. However, because it concerns itself more with the role of literature and myth in community formation and less with the act of singularities, I have focused my attention on the other three works.

17 Against this form of narrative, Gibson reminds us of the spatial relationship between storyteller and receiver (other/Same) in Levinas: the ethical relation emerges

“not as my knowledge dominates the other, but as the moral height of the other dominates me” (49, 57).

18 See Iser, *Literary Anthropology*, Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*; Miller, *The Ethics of Reading and Others*; Phelan, *Living to Tell About It*; Schwab, *The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language*; Schweickart, “Understanding an Other: Reading as Receptive Form of Communicative Action.”

CHAPTER II

NOWHERE TO NOW-HERE: CONTRACT VERSUS RELATION IN SUBURBIA

In a pivotal scene of Neil LeBute's 2008 film *Lakeview Terrace*, Abel Turner (played by Samuel L. Jackson) takes new neighbor Chris Mattson on a walk around the cul-de-sac. Displeased by the presence of Caucasian Chris and his African American wife Lisa, Abel uses the occasion to demonstrate his authority in the neighborhood. As he lectures Chris on the differences between good and bad neighbors, Abel informs Chris that he and Lisa fall firmly into the latter category. Chris responds by reminding Abel that interracial marriages are accepted in most of the U.S., including the city where Abel serves as a police officer – a point Abel firmly rebuffs. “That’s where I work,” he barks; “This is where I live.”

Abel’s distinction between the place where he lives and the place where he works is one of the defining characteristics of suburbia. Unlike rural areas where farmers live next to their crops and livestock or urban spaces where apartments and townhomes are surrounded by shops and offices, suburbanites treat their homes and neighborhoods as something removed or different from all other points of interaction. So while suburbanites like Abel admit the necessary plurality of other locations – they might not agree with everyone who lives there, but they realize that difference is an unavoidable

consequence of the space – they do expect some homogeny, and in fact control, in their own subdivisions. To maintain this control, many neighborhoods employ contracts to guide behavior and make expectations explicit, usually in the form of Home Owner’s Associations (HOAs) and their Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions (CC&Rs), which regulate everything from mailbox colors and length of grass to the types of people who can be on the property. Contrary to the pretensions to control implicit in these contracts, many suburban fictions frame such limitations as unnecessarily binding and unwanted, focusing instead on the divergent, the surprising and disagreeable that occurs when people share space. *Lakeview Terrace* takes these disagreements to a violent extreme, as Chris and Abel’s clashes escalate from mundane annoyances – intrusive security lights and trash falling into adjoining yards – to home invasion and fistfights on the front lawn, justifying their behavior by claiming that the other has violated some agreement: Abel has harassed the Mattsons and made them uncomfortable; Chris flicks his cigarettes into Abel’s yard and he and Lisa had sex in the pool where the Turner children could see. *Lakeview Terrace* is far from the only story about home owners battling each other because of perceived violations of a neighborhood code; in fact, similar scenes occur in nearly every suburban fiction, from milquetoast sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* to slasher movies like *Scream*.

The popularity of these plots, I argue, stems from the prevalence of HOAs and CC&Rs, which impose a contractual model to nearly every form of interaction between neighbors. As in classical social contract theory and in American transcendentalism, the logic of contracts emphasizes the performance of *a priori* terms and makes a distinction

between a false external self and an authentic internal self; this approach conceives of neighbors as egoistic agents operating within a nexus of knowable, controllable situations. The emphasis on a performative external identity has led critics, pundits, and even suburbanites themselves to dismiss the region as a pre-fabricated “nowhere” filled with conformists and fakes. For the most part, I agree with this criticism – associations mediated by contracts or social gestures can invite dishonesty or hypocrisy; however, many fictions seem to suggest that these problems stem not from the type of people who live in the suburbs, but with the contracts themselves, which reduce the potentiality of its signatories to a limited set of unsatisfying possibilities. Contrary to the static, unethical associations assumed by contracts, narratives of the suburbs tend to imagine associations between neighbors as fraught and messy, focusing on the way face-to-face interactions exceed contractual models, demanding a hospitality that does not adhere to predetermined agreements. In this chapter, I examine three novels that exemplify this critical hospitality and repudiating the notion of a pre-social, authentic self: Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, John Cheever’s *Bullet Park*, and Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*. Drawing from Heidegger’s redefinition of Rousseauist authenticity from a solipsistic egoism to a recognition to the present and factual, I argue that these novels describe social contracts as not only untenable, but ultimately unsatisfying and undesirable compared to the immediacy of face-to-face interactions. As these fictions repeatedly insist, anti-contractual relationships with real and immediate others offer a more ethical definition of authenticity, available in any place where people come to live, even the suburbs.

Why Suburbia?

Although Americans choose to live in the suburbs for several different reasons, most of its advantages can be distilled to the following basic benefits: the esteem related with home ownership, the autonomy that comes from private property, and the right to affiliate with peers of one's own choosing. Of these advantages, the promise of home ownership is invoked most often, as it holds a privileged position in "American Dream" narratives. The language of land tenure has long-since dominated political rhetoric, from Herbert Hoover's 1931 White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership to Lyndon Johnson's 1968 Fair Housing Act to Barack Obama's 2009 Helping Families Save Their Homes Act. The high-minded language in Hoover's address to conference attendees best encapsulates the romanticism of private property:

I am confident that the sentiment for home ownership is so embedded in the American heart that millions of people who dwell in tenements, apartments, and rented rows of solid brick have the aspiration for wider opportunity in ownership of their homes. To possess one's own home is the hope and ambition of almost every individual in our country, whether he lives in hotel, apartment, or tenement.

These comments underscore the conflation of owner occupation with personal achievement, thereby framing the purchase of a home as an economic victory and a wise investment. With its cheap land and affordable housing, suburbia gives most Americans their best chance at achieving this goal.

Private property connotes autonomy and a degree of sovereignty, which also draws residents to suburbia. More specifically, ownership of private property implies a

space to make decisions about one's own life and to form a solipsistic identity.

Sociologist John Agnew explains that, in an individualist, capitalist society,

[t]he single-family detached house with its greater isolation and insulation from others is a particularly appreciated symbol of self-sufficiency and personal autonomy ... In owning a house, therefore, people both provide a means for *communicating* their identity as autonomous individuals and offer a 'meaning-contribution' which represents the practice of the personal life. (76)

Connections between housing and identity remain strong in the American imagination, as can be seen in numerous examples from literature and popular culture, including Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and while rural, outland areas still best connote individualism and isolation, suburbia's affordable single-family dwellings provide sufficient privacy for many Americans. Although this autonomy is quite limited, suburban landscaping techniques, from the familiar white-picket fences to the use of undeveloped sanctuaries and common areas, are intended to maximize residents' privacy. In fact, the "contrived names" developers give their neighborhoods – e.g., Adams Farm, Oak Meadows, Brook Run – not only "tend toward the Romantic ... and often pay tribute to the natural or historic resource they have displaced," but they also attempt to invoke rustic removal and a connection to the land, implying more solitude than actually available (Duany, et. al. 5).

Most Americans accept suburbia's restricted privacy because it offers some isolation while still allowing for limited association with neighbors. Herbert J. Gans, whose book *Levittowners* chronicles the two years he spent as a "participant observer" in a New Jersey Levittown development, portrays the subdivision as a network of

intersecting communities formed around everything from ethnicity to bridge games. The desire to choose one's associations has, of course, manifested in some of the more notorious elements of postwar suburbia, including white flight, restrictive HOAs and CC&Rs, and the "Not-In-My-Backyard" (NIMBY) movement. The 3rd act of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* powerfully illustrates the effects of these exclusions, in which a racist HOA prevents an African American family from purchasing a house in an all-white Chicago suburb. The HOA representative justifies his group's decision on grounds of familiarity and identity, stating that "a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way. And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the community, when they share a common background" (III). While Supreme Court decisions, protest movements, and population shifts have certainly decreased incidents of racial exclusions, this logic remains potent: people wish to associate around their own kind, whatever that kind might be.¹ Whether framed as the right to choose the environment in which their children will be raised or as an acceptance into "lifestyle suburbs" – "communities tailored to the needs and preferences of a specific lifestyle" – suburbs present themselves as a place where people "belong" (Teaford 71).²

To be sure, each of these elements can be found in any living space, but the suburbs were specifically designed to provide a unique mix of private property, privacy, and socialization to the most Americans. According to observers, these appeals are part of a "reenchantment" of suburbia, which stems from not only the work of "architects,

urban designers, and planners” who directly market to would-be homeowners, but also from the various contracts employed to secure these promises (Knox 88). The contractual, then, serves as the dominant logic of suburban interaction, encompassing everything from formal bonds (like CC&Rs or sales agreements) to the expectations neighbors impose upon one another; they define the terms of interaction between residents and claim to offer security by diminishing the potential conflicts inherent when people gather together. The prominence of suburban contracts has, unsurprisingly, been a point of contention, with some praising the priority of local agreements over federal and state regulations, while others – most vocally, political scientist Even MacKenzie – believe that HOAs have made living spaces into “privatopias” that undermine the potential for community. In the absence of larger government regulation, McKenzie argues, “[p]rivate developers and businessmen ... have long been the dominant force in American urban planning,” and as a result, “American real estate development corporations, with government as a silent partner, have chosen to build a new kind of community that serves as a monument to privatism” (7-8). The potential for self-determination offered by limited government and local rule, McKenzie claims, is undermined by commercial interests and binding contracts created by developers and realtors – many of whom no longer actually live in the neighborhood.³ To McKenzie, these contracts pervert the ideals of classical social contract theory, as they create “a state of nature devoid of people except for the developer-creator, who begets the ‘community’ and its social order to his liking and makes it unchangeable” (146). But Michael Monohan, who shares McKenzie’s distrust of CC&Rs, believes that they reveal the

competitive individualism inherent in Thomas Hobbes's vision of the commonwealth. This debate has been furthered by several critics who find a correlation between suburban governance and the theories of Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau – or their American followers Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau – even if they disagree about the accuracy of the theory's application to the suburbs.⁴

Although it would be inaccurate to describe Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the first suburbanite, his philosophy does help explain some of the oddities of suburban interactions. More specifically, suburbia's three basic advantages – esteem, autonomy, and association – are conferred and defended by Rousseauist social contracts. The right of association is paramount in Rousseau's philosophy, as people only form communities with those who will benefit them; because this requirement necessarily limits the diversity and size of societies, Rousseau prefers smaller civil units, such as the village or the city-state, which anticipates the suburb's position on the periphery of the city or country.⁵ Rousseau insists on these smaller units because he wishes to defend the principle behind suburbia's second appeal, the right of autonomy. As in the suburbs, Rousseau's contract only allows for a restricted autonomy, but both arrangements justify these restrictions by claiming that individuals can only achieve their wishes through associations and therefore must accept the burdens required to maintain them. Furthermore, Rousseau believes that self-interest or self-love (*amour de soi*) benefits a society because a self-interested individual will do what is necessary to reinforce the community that advances his or her advantages. CC&Rs operate under the same logic,

claiming that a homeowner who takes care of his or her own property, for example, will raise the value of all the properties in a neighborhood. Finally, self-esteem (*amour-propre*) can only come from associations, as isolated individuals have no others to acknowledge and respect their rights. And while Rousseau fears that *amour-propre* might distract from the more beneficial *amour de soi*, a certain aspiration for the rights conferred by social interactions initially motivates community formation. Again, the CC&Rs are the key here – they provide a model of interaction and expectation that allows individuals to achieve these three goals.

Rousseau's notion of the general will helps explain why property owners would accept HOA restrictions. According to Rousseau, the pre-social savage man may be perfectly self-sufficient, but natural calamities and the desire for rights drives him or her into societies. In the same way homeowners accept certain restraints on the use of their property to gain admission into a neighborhood, Rousseau argues that “[w]hat man loses through the social contract is his natural liberty and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can acquire. What he gains is civil liberty and the proprietary ownership of all he possesses” (151). Despite assent to these restrictions, most people are vigilant to avoid unnecessary and unbeneficial burdens. Rousseau insists that each member of a society ensures the necessity of regulations by submitting to the “general will.” The general will is the manifestation of the people's decision – not located in a particular individual, such as Hobbes's all-powerful sovereign, or even in the will of a representative body, but rather the collective opinion of a society's members. And while Rousseau does concede that private interest might initially contradict the general will, he

claims that the very fact that most accept these burdens proves their benefit. The society Rousseau envisions “is one of a limited number of solutions to the problem of collective action: citizens who evaluate alternatives from the vantage point of their common interests and are prepared to act upon this judgment can avoid the unwanted outcomes awaiting rational egoists whose wills are fixed upon a narrower object” (Hill 39). In short, Rousseau’s social contract secures the rights and protection craved by the modern citizen while preserving the inalienable autonomy he or she needs.

Although Rousseau never actually used the word “authenticity,” Charles Guignon notes, “it seems obvious that all of the core assumptions built into the concept of authenticity are fully worked out in his writings” (59). Indeed, a concern for the authentic identity informs all of his discourses, including his political thought.⁶ The pre-social savage, Rousseau writes in his “Discourse on the Origins of Inequality,” can be completely happy and sufficient without community: “as long as they applied themselves exclusively to tasks that a single individual could do and to the arts that did not require the cooperation of several hands, they lived as free, healthy, good and happy as they could in accordance with their nature: and they continued to enjoy among themselves the sweet rewards of independent intercourse” (65). In the same way *Emile: or, On Education* formulates a pedagogy that mitigates society’s tendency to “denature” its members, Rousseau’s political theories advance a social structure that protects the authentic self from the contamination of others. As suggested by his praise of Geneva as a state where “all private individuals” are “known to one another,” and his claim that the group best suited for his social contract is one “where each member can be known to all,

and where there is no need to impose a greater burden on a man than a man can bear,” the society that best defends authenticity is one where members can recognize one another (26, 170). However, what they recognize is not the authentic neighbor – not the pre-social identity social contract theorists wish to defend – but a person who meets the requirements of a contract. These bonds then distinguish between a false external self, who performs the contract’s terms, and a true, authentic internal self that is not affected by the community’s demands. The notion of authenticity advanced by Rousseau motivates much of the suburban emphasis on conformity and gestures. According to Monohan, CC&Rs reconfigure the neighbor from a proximal figure – the result of a “shared social context which generates and conditions our interests in the same way that it conditions and renders our ability to individuate ourselves” – to an “isolated individual unit which happens to share loose, and purely formal, bonds with other similar units” (125,123).

This contractual approach has been a reoccurring point of contention among suburbia’s critics, as John Keats demonstrates in the aforementioned *The Crack in the Picture Window*. In the introduction to *Crack*, Keats characterizes suburbanites as a type of plague corrupting existing communities, “[c]onscious only of their unmet needs” and “intolerant of the political milieu they’ve invaded,” better at building “a sort of mutual loathing society” rallied against them than forming their own affinity groups (xvii). Keats’s accusation assumes a firm connection between space and identity, implying that those who fled to the suburbs were too frightened to accept urban others and too vain to acknowledge the harm done to established residents. Sociologists James Howard

Kunstler and Robert D. Putman both argue that this egocentric behavior arises from the distances suburbanites travel in their cars. Kunstler calls suburbia a “noplac” that combines

the worst social elements of the city and country and none of the best elements. As in the real country, everything was spread out and hard to get to without a car. There were no cultural institutions. And yet like the city, the suburb afforded no escape from other people into nature; except for some totemic trees and shrubs, nature had been obliterated by the relentless blocks full of houses. (105)

Disconnected from the land and forced to travel alone in their cars, detractors argue, residents become inconsiderate toward one another, never forming the types of relationships fostered by “proper” living spaces. Neither city nor country, these critics suggest, suburbia invariably transforms its inhabitants into atomists, interacting just enough to annoy one another, but never truly relating.

Social theorist Lewis Mumford pronounces the paradigmatic judgment of suburbia in his exhaustive 1961 study *The City in History*. Mumford treats the modern suburb as a failure in urban planning, claiming that the suburbs initially kept a balance between “rural and urban occupations” and “rural and urban pleasures,” describing the pre-20th century suburb as a place for an urbanite to “retreat from the city” and to “be [her or his] own unique self,” while still “commanding at will the privileges and benefits of urban society” (483, 485-486). As they became more common in the late 20th century, the “ultimate outcome of the suburb’s alienation from the city became visible,” namely the very monotony and loss of individuality pre-20th century suburbanites tried to avoid (486). Mumford argues that the human needs that once justified the suburban

exodus have made it into a fantasy land, catering to those who wished to retreat from “unpleasant realities, to shirk public duties, and to find the whole meaning of life in the most elemental social group, the family, or even in the still more isolated and self-centered individual” (494). For Mumford, the suburban neighborhood changes its inhabitants into irresponsible and thoughtless boors:

The end product is an encapsulated life, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set ... Those who accept this existence might as well be encased in a rocket hurling through space, so narrow are their choices, so limited and deficient their permitted responses. Here indeed we find “The Lonely Crowd.” (512)

Although they wish to condemn suburban exclusivity and conformity, I fear that Mumford, Kunstler, and Keats rely on problematic assumptions about identity and authenticity. Their grievances do not simply imply that contractualism inhibits the rights of others and invites violence against potential neighbors, which certainly has happened; rather they direct their complaints toward the people actually living in suburbia, the so-called drones or materialists. For Kunstler, having “a conversation with a stranger” is not only “the quintessential urban pleasure,” it is a *uniquely urban* pleasure, completely unavailable to suburbanites inoculated in their cars (127). Similarly, Mumford’s descriptions rely on stereotypical images of a simple, uncomplicated rural life and a busy, complex urban existence and juxtaposes them against broadly-drawn straw men. In each case, critics treat the suburbs like something inherently diseased, as if they were “from the outset overdetermined with cultural meaning” (Beuka 12).

However, by assuming the existence of a true self that can be corrupted by external forces and by inferring that certain types of people essentially belong in specific places, suburbia's detractors in fact invoke the logic of social contract theory, which actually motivates the regulations they despise. If a true internal self does exist, and if this self can be harmed by associations with others, then an individual should do what he or she can to protect that self. And is that not exactly what social contract theorists prescribe, and what HOAs and CC&Rs claim to offer? After all, if a type of individual is other to a group, and might harm that group or the group's property, shouldn't that person be excluded? Is that not responsible behavior? Many suburban fictions address these questions by rejecting the aforementioned three basic appeals and, in fact, the entire notion of an inviolable authentic identity. In the next section, I demonstrate this rejection with a reading of Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, which illustrates the impoverished lives that result from interactions based on Rousseauist authenticity.

Elsewhere off of *Revolutionary Road*

The conflict between the individual and civilization is, of course, a standard theme in American literature, but as several critics have observed, most characters long not for actual isolation, but rather a community that respects their individual freedoms.⁶ This concern for autonomy is, unsurprisingly, particularly strong in the work of those influenced by Rousseau and his fellow social contract theorists, namely American transcendentalists Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The three writers certainly held differing opinions about community, but none of them completely dismissed social

interactions: Emerson skeptically characterized society as a “conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members,” but continued to form groups and to lecture for audiences; Thoreau lived alone on Walden Pond, but often entertained guests and visited Concord pubs; Whitman might have been “a Kosmos” but he was never a “stander above men and women, or apart from them” (*Emerson’s Prose and Poetry* 122, “Song of Myself” 24.493,495). To defend this authenticity, each thinker devised a system of mediation which, like Rousseau’s social contract, distinguished between a knowable external self and an authentic internal self; consider, for example, Emerson’s notion of the “Over-Soul,” which made everything “part and particle” of “the eternal ONE” who can be accessed through meditation and solitude (164).⁷ The transcendentalists’ concern for authentic individuality appears variously in American fiction, as different social spaces require their own unique forms of mediation: the protagonists of Child’s *Hobomok* or Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* maintain their authenticity by rejecting or reinterpreting Puritan doctrine; Eliot’s wanderer in the Unreal City and Ellison’s Invisible Man navigate their urban environments by invoking social gestures; the mixed-blood outcasts in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* create new stories and rituals; and Melville’s Bartelby – Agamben’s paradigmatic example of potentiality in society – had his preference not to act. Suburban fiction, contending with ubiquitous CC&R-influenced contractualism, refigures this conflict between the individual and society by addressing the assumptions neighbors hold and impose on one another. The best-known stories, such as Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, Ira Levin’s pulpy sci-fi novel *The Stepford*

Wives, and the television series *Weeds* describe suburban hegemony from the perspective of a resident threatened by his or her neighbor's demands. However, a growing number of suburban fictions – including Phillip Roth's *American Pastoral*, Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age*, Frederick Barthleme's *Natural Selection*, Naylor's *Linden Hills*, and several others that will be discussed in later chapters – question the stability of neighborhood contracts. This skepticism is particularly strong in the three novels examined in this chapter – *Revolutionary Road*, *Bullet Park*, and *Independence Day*. Each of these narratives position suburbia against other living spaces, particularly the city, and interrogate the assumptions motivating suburban agreements, arguing that a community based on limiting, unethical arrangements will ultimately fail.

Of the three novels, Richard Yates's 1961 *Revolutionary Road* is by far the most cynical. Like contemporaries Keats and Wilson, Yates mocks suburban associations, but where other writers decry neighborhood expectations as harmful to one's authenticity, Yates questions the very idea of authenticity itself. His protagonists Frank and April Wheeler feel confined and suffocated by their suburban existence and long to "find themselves" by relocating to a mythic French countryside, but when an unwanted pregnancy and a promotion for Frank make this plan impossible, a distraught April performs a risky abortion that results in her death. This bleak narrative and unflattering portrayal of middle class America might suggest that Yates agrees with suburbia's detractors, and indeed many commentators read the novel in this manner.⁸ However, as I will demonstrate, Yates never blames the Wheelers' problems on suburbia itself, but on the kind of anti-social and instrumental behavior fostered by contractual restrictions. He

directs his satirical gaze squarely at the absurd lengths to which his characters will go to defend some vaguely defined “true self,” contrasting these pretensions to the staggering grief of those around them. This distinction introduces a level of empathy that not only transcends the novel’s asperity, but also posits the potential – however fleeting – for authentic engagement, even within the maligned suburbs.

Yates begins this reimagining of suburbia by comparing Frank and April’s middle class lives in Revolutionary Hills Estates to the “elsewheres” to which they wish to escape, particularly the New York City of their youth, where they experimented in faux-bohemianism and arbitrarily adopted and discarded various identities. While this play of selfhoods might recall Agamben’s potentiality – think Laurel Dumont’s fluidity in *Linden Hills* – Yates renders the Wheelers’ behavior childish and ultimately exclusionary: “It had been easy to decide in favor of love” in New York, April remembers, where “half the fun was that it was just like being married, and where later, after a trip to City Hall and back ... half the fun of being married was that it was just like having an affair” (47). In the same way the Wheelers look at indistinct France – a country that April only knows through travel guides and novels, and which Frank only visited briefly a soldier – as a place commensurate to their true selves, so also do they consider New York the birthplace of these identities, now under attack by suburban conformity. By tying their “true selves” to various elsewheres, the Wheelers see themselves as exceptional in their neighborhood, among the few “[i]ntelligent, thinking people” not caught up in “the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs.” Few scenes demonstrate this better than those of Frank pontificating to whomever will listen,

proclaiming that “[e]conomic circumstance might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing, always, was to remember who you were” (20). But instead of valorizing or confirming Frank’s spatial logic, Yates makes the Wheelers’ belief that “they alone ... were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture” or that their friends were “a big, big, big, colossal waste of time” seem boorish and obnoxious (60, 112). Furthermore, Yates undermines the Wheelers’ mythological elsewhere by showing little difference between the New York Wheelers, the (imagined) French Wheelers, and the actual Wheelers of Revolutionary Hills Estates. Young Frank, the narrator quips, imagined himself an “intense, nicotine-stained Jean-Paul Sartre sort of man” who was enamored with the idea that “he was admired ... that girls could actually want to go to bed with him [and] that men, and intelligent men, at that, could actually want to listen to him talk.” This Frank, the narrator informs us, was a man who believed that he deserved a “first-rate girl,” and was never “in doubt of what he meant by a first-rate girl, though he’d never yet come close enough to one to touch her hand” (21-22). The very aspects of themselves that the Wheelers consider special and true – setting them apart in a space where “[n]obody thinks or feels or cares any more; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity” – Yates renders vindictive, antagonistic, and ultimately false (60).

The Wheelers are not the only residents of Revolutionary Hills Estates who treat their neighbors with contempt, a fact that leads some readers to quite reasonably conclude that Yates is skeptical about suburbia’s communal possibilities. However, the novel’s

opening chapter, which describes the first and only performance of a community theater troupe called The Laurel Players, complicates this assumption by criticizing contractual authenticity, not simply the suburbs.⁹ Yates deftly unfolds the Player's shift from gracious optimism to dismay and bitterness over the course of a few pages, as the group fails to accomplish its goal. References to the Players "disarm[ing] each other at last with peals of forgiving laughter" and exchanging "apologetic nods" when a partner flubs a line distract from the darker implications of his prose, such as the opening lines that describe the "final dying sounds of the dress rehearsal," which leaves the players "silent and helpless" (5-6, 3). The tonal juxtaposition here reveals a utilitarian, almost mercenary aspect to the Player's generosity, reminding readers that the group formed for a single purpose: to perform the play, not just for entertainment, but as evidence of the community's worth. The Laurel Players may be "an amateur production," the narrator observes, but "a costly and very serious one;" or, as the director more plainly puts it, "Remember this. We're not just putting on a play here. We're establishing a community theater, and that's a pretty important thing to be doing" (4, 5). As these observations indicate, The Laurel Players provide a foundational myth for their larger community, and would-be actress April Wheeler – whom all the other Players praise and on whom the audience waits with great anticipation – is their muse; but once again, Yates's narration combines the transcendent and the banal, the "real" within the ideal, by stating that although she had by "a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort[,] bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs" (7).

Throughout the scene, Yates repudiates the characters' lofty ideals by foregrounding their unavoidable, but very real shortcomings.

Tellingly, Yates employs a peculiarly social metaphor to describe the affliction that leads to the catastrophic performance: the "virus of calamity, dormant and threatening all these weeks had erupted and now spread from the helplessly vomiting [lead actor] until it infected everyone in the cast but April Wheeler" (8-9). The phrasing here not only describes the unsuccessful staging, but also a shared guilt that cannot be isolated to one source. Moreover, this exposition draws attention to the striking parallels between The Laurel Players' aesthetic contract and Rousseau's social contract, as the players make a distinction between their external selves and their internal true selves, as indicated by the narrator's observation that the "trouble was that from the very beginning they had been afraid they would end by making fools of themselves, and they had compounded that fear by being afraid to admit it" (5). This communal nature is made more explicit when Yates expands his gaze to locate the Players' ambition within the larger social milieu, drawing attention to the audience – who, "[a]nyone could see ... were a better than average crowd, in terms of education and employment and good health" and who "considered this a significant evening" – watching with great expectations for "the brave idea" of the endeavor – "the healthy, hopeful sound of it: the birth of a really good community theater right here, among themselves" (6-7). Yates ironically twists the audience's presumptions, as the same social conventions that led them to judge and ultimately disregard the Players become binding, forcing them to behave in a manner contrary to their desires, as decency required them to greet the finale

not with disgust or even relief, but with applause that was “conscientiously long enough to permit two curtain calls” (10).

For most readers, Yates’s satirical account of the a bad performance of a relatively slight play by and for a group of *petit bourgeois* Americans sets the stage for his lambasting of suburbia in the Eisenhower-era, and certainly there is much to snicker at in Frank Wheeler’s assumption that he “was among the few who bucked the current” or in April Wheeler’s romantic vision of bohemianism (12). However, the narrator directs the blame elsewhere, claiming that the Players’ dissolution “could hardly be fobbed off on Conformity or the The Suburbs or American Society Today.” By shifting fault away from the residential model, Yates locates the shortcoming in the people involved or, more specifically, on the unrealistic expectations held by the participants. This problematic aspect is clear in the back-biting and squabbling that supplants the former generosity among the Players, and in self-satisfaction the narrator highlights when explaining that the audience “had come to The Petrified Forest with a surprisingly generous openness of mind, and had been let down” (61). This notion of being “let down” highlights the presumptuous nature of all participants, indicating that the disaster of The Laurel Players, the scene with which he opens his novel, is not evidence of the provincial affectations of the middle class, nor a repudiation of a popular residential model, but a cautionary tale against a type of contractualism and its effects on communal living. Indeed, the problems of this attitude recur again and again, beginning with the protagonists’ worldviews, the assumption that they are of better stock than their

surroundings suggest, and that their neighbor's inconvenient behavior violates the contract and puts their "true selves" at risk.

Yates makes this alternative logic strikingly clear in a pair of scenes that forgo his satirical sneer and reveal empathy for heretofore risible characters. The first occurs shortly after April Wheeler's death, in which a distraught, solitary Frank runs alone through the neighborhood:

The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy. Even at night, as if on purpose, the development held no looming shadows and no gaunt silhouettes. It was invincibly cheerful, a toyland of white and pastel houses whose bright, uncurtained windows winked blandly through a dappling of green and yellow leaves. Proud floodlights were trained on some of the lawns, on some of the neat front doors and on the hips of some of the berthed, ice-cream colored automobiles. (323)

The harsh descriptions of tacky materialism might recall the derisive descriptions of Keats, but notice the conflict Yates poses here: the cheap and tacky nature of the objects Frank encounters highlight his own fully human grief, and draw attention to the lack of other people. A man "running down these streets in desperate grief was indecently out of place," but only because his impropriety – "cut[ting] across someone's back yard and plunged into the down-sloping woods, intent on a madman's shortcut to Revolutionary Road" – fails to gain response. The tragic humor in the ridiculous image of Frank falling "down a rocky ravine" and coming up "with a child's enameled tin beach bucket in his hand" is that his despair demands response from the neighbors within the houses, a demand they ignore by hiding behind their material goods. Yates draws further attention to the absence of others by having Frank, upon entering his empty home, fabricate a

vision of April scolding him for getting wet and begins to clean the house, imagining her instructions as he works: “What’s the matter, Frank? Your pants are all muddy! Of course I’m all right...” (323). Furthermore, the facts of her absence – “the house ... with black windows, the only darkened house on the road” or the blood stains she left on the floor – only drive him to further awareness of their embodied life together: “How could she be dead when the house was alive with the sound of her and the sense of her? Even when he had finished the cleaning, when there was nothing to do but walk around and turn on lights and turn them off again, even then her presence was everywhere, as real as the scent of her dresses in the bedroom closet” (324). Frank’s insistence notwithstanding, April is not present; in fact, it is that very lack of presence that allows Frank to demonstrate his devotion by cleaning the house. Free from April’s embodied existence, Frank creates a phantasm in her place and acts responsibly towards this false figure. This insufficient, too-late responsibility underscores the central tragedy of the novel: rather than respond to what was real, rather than define their selves according to the present and factual, the Wheelers adhered to an ideal, pretend self, which pulled them away from one another.

Yates further calls attention to this solipsism by dividing the narrator’s attention between Frank’s lonesome trek through the neighborhood and neighbor Shep Campbell’s response. For most of the novel, Shep has been portrayed as a laughably pathetic figure who feigns admiration for Frank and longs after April, a disposition that only increased after April, in a fit of drunken depression, had sex with Shep in a bar parking lot. Yates provides a brief recap of this perception to begin the chapter detailing April’s death, as if

to remind readers of his miserable behavior. In the days following their liaison, Shep behaved “like any lovesick kid” and hassled April, despite the fact that she had “made it clear, in so many words, that he couldn’t see her at all, and that he should have known better than to ask.” The behavior he displays mirrors Frank’s response to an apparition as Shep ignores the real April’s wishes and “caused him to spend many hours in whispered rehearsal of the cool, mature, understanding things he would say when he called her again” (313). But shortly after reminding readers of this feeble and inadequate character, Yates offers a strikingly different portrayal – that of a “a tense, steady paratrooper, ready for action,” imbued with that “old combat feeling, the sense of doing exactly the right thing, quickly and well, when all the other elements of the situation were out of control” (314-315). It is Shep who calms Milly, who makes sure April is safely at the hospital, and retrieves Frank from work. In contrast to the petty resentment he felt toward Frank earlier in the novel, Shep now simply responds to the person in proximity, caring for the other in need.

Shep recognizes that Frank needs space when talking to the nurse or that Milly’s meddling is only her way of coping and – like the Players before the ill-fated performance – acts with grace and forgiveness. But where the Players fell back into solitary bitterness when those in proximity failed to live up to the contract, Yates here provides another model of community, in which the needs of the other supersede expectations and force those in proximity to respond. The hospitality Shep extends – setting aside his own sorrow at losing the object of his affection, his bitterness toward his own inadequate wife Milly, and his competitive jealousy of Frank – presents a

different form of relation than those found elsewhere in the novel. Accordingly, Yates tempers his heretofore vicious narrative voice, relaying events with far less viciousness than before. Most notably, Yates repeats the word “respect” to characterize Shep’s actions throughout the scene, highlighting not only the admirable aspects of his behavior but also its relational nature: unlike the derision implied in descriptions of the “long, clean serpent of cars” coming to watch the play or the “house lights [that] beamed and stumbled happily along” as grief-stricken Frank ran down the sidewalk, Yates’s narration is sober and generous (6, 323).

The change in tone is also fleeting, as Shep’s moment of engagement is a minor deviation in a story devoted to pretenders and fakes. As the final chapter turns back to Milly Campbell – who reduces her neighbors to gossip fodder and recounts their story with “too much of a voluptuous narrative pleasure” – and Mrs. Givings – who reasserts the social contract by dismissing the Wheelers as “a rather strange couple. Irresponsible” – *Revolutionary Road* ends as the anti-suburban cautionary tale that many readers have assumed it to be (327, 336). But the scene’s novelty makes it all the more important, a disruptive moment that cannot be explained by the usual interpretive models most readers apply, and sets it apart from its contemporaries. Where the artificiality of Rolling Knolls Estates eventually overwhelms Keats’s Drones and where Wilson’s Tom Rath saves his marriage and his dignity by escaping his neighborhood, Yates shows people rejecting the confines of a contract and behaving authentically in suburbia. Contrary to Rousseau’s vision of society, Shep acts against his own interests and forgoes his rights as a signatory to the social contract; he preferences ethics over law. Unlike the neighbors who

disregarded Frank's grief and hid in their homes, Shep engaged and responded to the man in need – the same man who made him jealous and who drove his dream woman to endanger herself. Drawn into responsibility by the inescapable reality of Frank's anguish, Shep violates the terms of the social agreement, entering a house uninvited and chasing after a man who does not want to be found, and cares for his neighbor. Shep's behavior repudiates the claims made by Mumford, Keats, and other critics by demonstrating that inauthentic social gestures are not the sole form relationship within suburbia; furthermore, the scene exposes the limits of Rousseau's definition of authenticity and calls for another model, an authenticity based on the facts and elements of everyday life, not on some imaginary intended self created in seclusion from the real world.

Living and Dying in *Bullet Park*

In his reading of *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Roberto Esposito observes that, despite his inclination otherwise, Rousseau cannot be as isolated as he wants because “that isolation expresses in a reversed form the irreducible need for sharing [*condivisione*]:”

His ego coincides with the impulse to be fed outside itself: ‘to be shared’ with the other in the profound sense of sharing the other's alterity. His existence, from this point of view, isn't anything except the irrepressible radiating and spilling out in what doesn't belong to his existence, but of which it nevertheless is a part. This is the reason that Rousseau cannot bring himself to hate even those whom he believes are persecuting him. The impossibility of doing so isn't properly ethical but essentially ontological. How can one hate someone, even one's worst enemy, when each participates in what is constitutively shared [*comune*]? (60)

Esposito's interpretation reveals the extent to which Rousseau, even in his solitary persona, relies on others – not just to enact his economic self-interest, but to even have a consciousness. The intersubjectivity Esposito discovers in Rousseau draws heavily from Heidegger's connection between authenticity and spatial relations. Heidegger rejects the possibility of the fully-sufficient pre-social identity assumed by social contract theorists and claims that all knowledge and consciousness requires relationships with others. Dasein – Heidegger's term for conscious, existing individuals – is never isolated, but is always “Being-in” or “Being-with” something outside of itself.¹⁰ The self, then, cannot be solitary or predetermined; it is always in relation. These relations are necessary because Dasein does not create a world according to his or her wishes, but is “thrown” into a world already populated with subjects, objects, and moods. The experience of being-in-the-world most often involves unreflective interaction with these elements, which finds them “ready-to-hand” (*zuhanden*) or available for use. According to Heidegger, “No matter how sharply we just *look* at the ‘outward appearance’ of Things ... we cannot discover everything ready-to-hand,” and therefore must rely on the common understanding of these things (98). According to this logic, then, an individual cannot be isolated because everything one thinks and knows comes from others.

Being authentic (*eigenlich*), or enacting one's identity, involves interpreting the materials of one's existence in a manner different from his or her neighbors. In a thrown state, Dasein is limited to the opinions of *das man* or the “they:” a neuter, faceless reference to indistinct others who are “not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all” (164). The “they” transmits information about the

world, and therefore is a necessary part of becoming, but living only according to the “they” is, for Heidegger, inauthentic; the inauthentic Dasein only superficially interacts with others, uncritically accepting their perceptions. The “they” ensnares Dasein in inauthenticity, which can only be reversed when Dasein brings itself “back to itself from the lostness in the ‘they.’” This bringing back to lostness is not a separation from others through mediating agreements, but a recognition of one’s factual relation to the “they,” taking the form of “an existentiell modification of the ‘they’” (312). As Lawrence Vogel puts it, “[t]here is no pure authenticity but at best an authentic appropriation of the authentic. The possibilities one can make one’s own do not come from nowhere; they are handed down to one from the factual world to which one belongs” (12). The authentic self, an individual’s true identity, therefore requires relation to those in one’s proximity, who will provide the “they-self” Dasein modifies “in an existentiell manner so that it becomes *authentic* Being-one’s-Self” (313).

Contemporary identity theorists Charles Taylor and K. Anthony Appiah have expanded on Heidegger’s approach by refiguring this process of formation for the modern liberal state. In his re-evaluation of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, Appiah argues that although an individual in a liberal society must be free to pursue his or her own conception of the good, this concept cannot be created in a vacuum because even when we design our plans of life, the material from which we form these plans is wholly unoriginal: “Autonomy, we know, is conventionally described as an ideal of self-authorship. But the metaphor should remind us that we write in a language we did not ourselves make” (156). All stances, including rejections of a particular viewpoint or

affinity, require the presence of an other to bring it to our attention. Similarly, Taylor claims that although an individual “can always be original, can step beyond the limits of thought and vision of contemporaries, can even be quite misunderstood by them ... the drive to original vision will be hampered, will ultimately be lost in inner confusion, unless it can be placed in some way in relation to the language and vision of others” (*Sources of the Self* 37-38).¹¹ As this claim indicates, authenticity is always relational, and can never transcend the individual’s immediate milieu. When we talk about who we are, Taylor notes, we refer to the “background against which our tastes and desires and opinions and aspirations make sense. If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes integral to my identity” (*The Ethics of Authenticity* 34). Appiah takes this further by emphasizing the contributions from those we do not choose to have in our lives, arguing that

the putatively autonomous individual [is] confined to the options that are available to you; and those options themselves represent fixities, a nexus of institutions and practices you did not create yourself. If your values represent what you desire to desire, ... what you desire to desire may not be up to you, in the sense that your ‘will’ is the product of forces external to it. (53)

Like *Revolutionary Road*, John Cheever’s 1969 novel *Bullet Park* addresses the difference between an authentic relational identity and one mediated by pre-determined agreements. This difference is played out in the struggle between the proudly stereotypical suburbanite Eliot Nailles and newcomer Paul Hammer, who plans on waking the residents of Bullet Park from their materialistic stupor by murdering Nailles’s son Tony. Cheever’s reputation as an apologist for suburbia, combined with the

absurdity of the novel's plot, has prompted some readers to dismiss *Bullet Park* as a simplistic parable about good and evil, but, as other readers have noted, not only do these interpretations reduce Nailles and Hammer into uncomplicated caricatures, they also overstate Cheever's devotion to the suburbs. From the dislocated Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" to the self-destructive Wapshot family, Cheever's fiction often mingles appreciation and condemnation of suburbia.¹² As Timothy Aubry explains, because "the very essence of suburban experience is to be included/excluded, Cheever is in a difficult position as a satirist. To critique or mock suburbia, to feel or pretend to be outside suburbia, is the essence of what it means to be a suburbanite, so the more he jabs, the more he implicates himself as a part of the company he is critiquing" (69). Aubry's use of spatial metaphors reveals an important truth about suburbia, which Cheever's work makes clear: the suburbanites' wish to be included in excluding outsiders is self-defeating and ultimately makes pure separation untenable. As the last of Cheever's suburban-focused works, *Bullet Park* vividly illustrates this spatial co-mingling, and suggests that suburban authenticity cannot rely on mere isolation or predetermined gestures.

Cheever's study of suburban agreements begins with the novel's protagonist, Eliot Nailles. Nailles and his wife Nellie not only embrace middle-class stereotypes, but they embody them to the point of absurdity: Nailles recites advertising slogans with a near-religious devotion, adores his wife to a degree that others find "morbid, aberrant and devious," and will employ violence to protect and raise his son (24). They position their love of suburbia against the city that they consider depraved, bizarre, and unfathomable, a disposition Cheever illustrates with a scene in which Nellie travels downtown to attend a

modern theater performance. When a male actor undresses on stage, Nellie is shocked by the man's impropriety – his violation of perceived agreements – and she tries to regain composure by looking for those who meet her expectations of “honest mothers, wives, women who took pride in their houses, their gardens, their flower arrangements, their cooking;” when she fails to find them, she escapes back to her neighborhood (31). The narration describing her return conflates the spatial shift with the recovery of her identity:

Boarding the train was a step in the right direction. She was going home and she would, in the space of an hour, be able to close her door on that disconcerting and rainy afternoon. She would be herself again, Nellie Nailles, Mrs. Eliot Nailles, honest, conscientious, intelligent, chaste, etc. But if her composure depended upon shutting doors, wasn't her composure contemptible? Contemptible or not, she felt, as the train moved, the symptoms of restoration. When she left the train at her stop and walked through the parking lot to her car she arrived back at herself. (32)

The connection between space, performance, and identity draws attention to the way Nailles and Nellie conceive their neighborhood: it is a place where they know their neighbors and their neighbors know them, a place bound by agreements. According to the social contract theorist's emphasis on similarity, the Nailles behave morally when they distance themselves from others and the actor's behavior offends their autonomous goals and therefore should be shunned.

The tension in *Bullet Park* comes from the way spatial separation fails to maintain these agreements, as Nailles's perceptions are challenged by internal and external threats. The external threat comes in the form of Paul Hammer. As forecasted by the characters' names, Cheever positions Hammer as the antithesis of Nailles: he is the product of an affair between a would-be anarchist and her married boss and believes that his unhappy

childhood and cosmopolitanism has made him more authentic than most Americans. Hammer shares his mother's disgust of the "squalor, spiritual poverty and monotony of selfishness" she associates with middle-class America, and she urges him to find a paragon of that lifestyle – "some young man, preferably an advertising executive, married with two or three children, a good example of a life lived without any genuine emotion or value" – and then "crucify him on the door of Christ's Church" (168-169). Hammer enacts this plan by manipulating suburban contracts and masquerading as a typical good neighbor, which endears him to Nailles. Despite some initial misgivings – Nailles' belief "in the mysterious power of nomenclature" forces him to resent his new neighbor – Hammer's ability to perform the external duties of a proper suburbanite convinces Nailles to dismiss these fears as irrational and, after spending time together, Nailles pulls Hammer further into his life, inviting him to fishing expeditions and recommending him for induction into the volunteer fire brigade (20). Cheever makes Nailles' faith in suburban contracts so great that even as reasons to distrust Hammer begin to pile up, Nailles remains reluctant to doubt him; Nailles has seen Hammer attend church, travel to work, and hold parties for his friends – the actions demanded by suburban agreements – and therefore fully trusts him. But the foolishness of this belief, or perhaps more generously, the ease with which Hammer exploits the neighborhood contract, advances Cheever's reimagining of the suburban experience by rendering it ridiculous and even dangerous.

For the Nailles, their son Tony becomes the external force that exposes them to alternative possibilities. Although Hammer chooses Tony as his sacrificial representative

of middle class banality, the teen is, in fact, largely uninterested in his parents' lifestyle, preferring the potentialities he associates with urban spaces. Cheever illustrates Tony's growing alterity in a scene in which he and Eliot go golfing. When Tony dismisses the idea of going to school, Eliot urges him to conform, insisting that "you had to observe some of the rules of the game" (116). Tony responds by dismissing the "rules of the game" and, by extension, the constituent elements of Eliot's identity:

So then he said, "Maybe I don't want to get married. I wouldn't be the first man in the world who didn't want to get married, would I? Maybe I'm queer. Maybe I want to live with some nice, clean faggot. Maybe I want to be promiscuous and screw hundreds and hundreds of women. There are other ways of doing it besides being joined in holy matrimony and filling up the castle. If having babies is so great why did you only have one? Why just one?"...So then he said that I had got to understand that he might not want to come home at dusk to a pretty woman and play softball with a bunch of straight-limbed sons. He said he might want to be a thief or a saint or a drunkard or a garbage man or a gas pumper or a traffic cop or a hermit. (117-118)

When Tony goes one step further and belittles the mouthwash business, Eliot swings his club at his son. As someone who defines himself as a loving and responsible father, the action agitates Eliot: "I was very angry. I couldn't understand how my only son, whom I love more than anything in the world, could make me want to kill him" (118). Although he does not realize it, Eliot wanted to kill his son because he defines his life so completely by his personal concept of suburbia, based not on the factual reality of his neighborhood – after all, is not Tony, who was raised and continues to live in Bullet Park, a suburbanite? – but in his own ideals. So when Tony aligns himself with the city and disrupts Eliot's assumptions, he becomes unrecognizable to his father; in the course of one conversation, Tony shifts from beloved son to some unknowable other.

Despite the horrific nature of Eliot's attack, it becomes the first step toward relational, non-contractual authenticity. Eliot's actions send Tony into a deep depression, leaving him mysteriously bed-ridden for months, and Eliot's realization that he could have killed his son forces him to recognize the potential of death. According to Heidegger, witnessing the shift from Dasein to no-longer-Dasein, individuals become aware of death as "*the end of Dasein*" and "*Dasein's ownmost possibility*" (303, emphasis original). When one accepts that he or she can never outstrip the possibility of death, Dasein begins to anticipate it, and for Heidegger, this anticipation is freeing:

When, by anticipation, one becomes free *for* one's own death, one is liberated from one's lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped. Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one's tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached. [...] Since anticipation of the possibility which is not to be outstripped discloses also all the possibilities which lie ahead of that possibility, this anticipation includes the possibility of taking the *whole* of Dasein in advance in an existentiell manner; that is to say, it includes the possibility of existing as a *whole potentiality for being*. (308-309)

This existing as a *whole potentiality for being* manifests in resoluteness, which is both a recognition of Dasein's immediate existence and the possibilities from that existence, not just the possibilities allowed by the "they." In being resolute, Dasein puts forth an identity, but it is based on relation to what is possible:

Resoluteness, as *authentic Being-one's-Self*, does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating "I." And how should it, when resoluteness as authentic disclosedness, is *authentically* nothing else than *Being-in-the-world*? Resoluteness brings the Self right into its current concerned

Being-alongside what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others. (344)

In short, the experience of seeing another person die clarifies the limits one's life, limits based on real experiences. Death lets individuals find themselves by grounding them spatially and forcing them to base their identities on that grounding.

Tony's potential death prompts the Nailles to forego their antipathy towards those outside of their neighborhood and to welcome a mystic healer called Swami Rutuola. Juxtaposed against the two local doctors who first attempt to heal Tony, Rutuola is markedly other to the Nailles, and this alterity poses a significant problem for them. Cheever's narration foregrounds the difference between Bullet Park and Rutuola's Greenwich Village, and highlights the profound discomfort Nellie feels when seeking the Swami's help. Mirroring Nellie's previous experience in the city, when she witnessed the offending play, Cheever stages her trip to the Swami's as another struggle for identity, this time with different results. As before, Nellie feels lost and decentered; she tries to compare the area to "the rooms of her own house," but is overtaken by the "alien reek of the hallway – the immemorial reek of such places," which seemed "to strip her of any moral reliability." In the same way Nellie ran from the theater before, her instinct here "was to turn and go;" but in her condition of being-toward-death that follows Tony's sickness, she accepts that "her duty was to climb the stairs" (128). Cognizant that her prior "shut-door composure" was contemptible, Nellie abandons the sheltered housewife persona she so carefully crafted: "She seemed to be saying goodbye to herself at a railroad station; standing among the mourners at the edge of a grave. Goodbye Nellie"

(128-129). Initially, Nellie tries to recreate the social contract and take on the role of a person who belongs in the downtown building, like a census taker or a relief worker; but her need exceeds the terms of any contract and her simultaneous ignorance of and reliance on the others she encounters make predeterminations impossible. She is forced to act authentically, identifying herself by the facts of the space in which she dwells: “She was a woman with a sick son, looking (at the advice of a thief) for a magician” (129).

Where Nellie recreates her identity in a place she hates, Eliot has his persona disrupted in the place he loves, his home in Bullet Park. Desperate to help Tony, Eliot welcomes Rutuola – whom Cheever gives both an indeterminate race (“a light-skinned Negro”) and an indistinct accent (his was “a rootless speech”) – into the neighborhood to perform his mystic rituals (130).¹³ Upon entering the Nailles’s house, he asserts his control over it, locking Eliot and Nellie out of their son’s room and insisting he not be disturbed, and he begins his work by cleaning Tony’s room. Eliot does not shun the Swami, but responds to his presence – even if this response is frustration or doubt – and thereby allows his assumptions to be shattered. Where he once tried to beat the otherness out of his son, Eliot here relates to a person he does not understand but ultimately needs. Cheever illustrates the change with a scene in which Eliot, after Tony has been healed, prepares for a party. Earlier, he demanded that his family adhere to the social contract and “obey the rules of the game,” specifically insisting that no one should walk around “bare ass;” but Eliot now feels “a powerful reluctance to dress,” and fantasizes about a life spent wearing only “a fig leaf, a tiger skin, [or] nothing at all” (240). The presence of others has opened him to possibilities he had not previously considered, and even if he

ultimately rejects these possibilities, this rejection, as Appiah and Taylor argue, is given significance through his relation to those differences.

The heightened action of the final chapter brings all these disparate characters together within Bullet Park, but the novel's closing line undercuts any sense of climax or enduring resolution. Against the darkly comic descriptions of Hammer drugging and abducting Tony and of Eliot breaking into the church with an ax, Cheever ends his story on a falsely cheery note: "Tony went back to school on Monday and Nailles – drugged – went off to work and everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been" (245). Some critics, who read this line unironically, consider Hammer "no Pilate or Caligula [but rather] an Abraham or, perhaps, a Judas burdened with necessary guilt but incapable of carrying out the betrayal," the Nailles family "urethane-coated" because they "escape tragedy;" according to this interpretation, the novel is nothing more than a "mad comedy, and more horrible for it," devoid of any critique of suburban life (Collins 7). To these readers, Cheever never doubted that middle class values would triumph over Hammer's worldly wisdom, making the line a sarcastic act of geographical ethnocentrism. But this interpretation overlooks the incongruity in Cheever's description of Eliot and Tony – the father has become a drug addict and the son, his body wasted by entropy, still has no zeal for the school to which he returns – and it ignores the important qualifying phrase "as it had been." Michael D. Byrne is closer to the mark when he argues that, in *Bullet Park*, Cheever's "attitude toward suburbia is one of complete ambivalence: no longer did he privilege the community, no longer did he strain to justify its existence." The novel's complexity, observes Byrne, "lingers in the imagination like

an unsolved riddle or a confusing joke – or a paradox whose complexity is irreducible” (86). Indeed, the phrase “as it had been” foregrounds this paradoxical irreducibility, revealing that the bizarre mix of optimism and fatalism, genuine caring and abject depravity, in the image of drug-addled Eliot and emaciated Tony marching back to their respective milieus that closes the novel has been present from the beginning. The subdivision does not remain, as Collins suggests, as flatly intact as it was before; rather, Bullet Park was always multifarious and incoherent. Its alien reek was not imported with Hammer and the Swami, but was already present with the Wickwires and the Nailles, with singular individuals who lived and interacted with one another. True, this complexity may have been obscured by the contracts residents tried to impose on one another – Eliot’s insistence on his definition of the middle class good or Hammer’s false gestures – but as Cheever vividly demonstrates, these restrictions inevitably fail when people authentically dwell together.

Reality against Realty in *Independence Day*

In an interview with Wendell Smith, Richard Ford explains that writing his series about sportswriter-turned-Realtor Frank Bascombe – *The Sportswriter*, *Independence Day*, and *The Lay of the Land* – forced him to acknowledge the importance of suburbia. Though he believes that there are “lots of things to dislike about the suburbs,” he finally had to admit that “people don’t dislike them” and rather than attack the region with a Keats-like screed, Ford decided that “it might be more interesting surgery on the suburbs to talk about them in unironic terms” (Smith 53-54). Ford begins this surgery by making

his protagonist Bascombe assert a difference between suburbia and other living spaces: he comes to Haddam because he wants a stable house close to his children and ex-wife, he wants a quiet neighborhood, and he wants the freedom to pursue a new career in real estate. The key element to each of these desires is a sense of disengagement and independence, the wish to make and dissolve relationships as he sees fit, to “avoid complications” and dwell among the “facades-only and non-literate” people in “a little Anyplace, a grinning, toe-tapping, Terre Haute or wide-eyed Bismark, with stable property values, regular garbage pick-up, good drainage, simple parking, [and] located not far from a major airport” (Ford *The Sportswriter* 31, 104). But the real dissection Ford undertakes upsets these distinctions, as Bascombe’s attempts to mediate relationships are undermined by both demands for hospitality that exceed the terms of his contractual thought and by the unavoidable presence of death. Although he loses the freedom and irresponsibility he wanted when he originally moved to the suburbs, Ford also suggests that Bascombe gains a nuanced sense of self through his suburban associations.

Bascombe’s independence ethic comes from the vision of authenticity and mediation advanced by Emerson, particularly the following passage, which is quoted in the novel: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (124). Bascombe’s attempts to enact Emersonian sociability arise from a state of mind that he calls “The Existence Period,” which makes him more grounded and forces him to concentrate not on becoming but on

being. While this grounding may suggest a Heideggarian or Levinasian type of authenticity, Bascombe's interest in presence and immediacy functions more like a tautology, in which he ignores "much of what [he doesn't] like or that seems worrisome and embroiling," and tries to mingle "interest ... with uninterest[,] intimacy with transience, caring with the obdurate uncaring" (10, 76).¹⁵ By focusing solely on his own immediate interests, no longer concerned with the lives of others or on his past or future actions, Bascombe believes that he has found a "good, permanent and adaptable strategy for meeting life's contingencies other than head-on" (115). Apropos of the spatial language Emerson employs in "Self-Reliance" – "though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till" – Bascombe considers real estate to be the ideal occupation of the Existence Period, as it allows him to interact with people only responding to their needs in relation to his abilities and resources (121).¹⁴ So while he is often privy to his client's intentions and problems, he only addresses those that fall within his duties as a real estate agent. A senior agent summarizes Bascombe's position thusly: "You know, your soul's not supposed to be in this ... This is realty. *Reality's* something else" (115).

Ford systematically dismantles Bascombe's Existence Period resolve throughout the novel, particularly in a short, seemingly tangential scene midway through *Independence Day*; too weary to continue a late-night drive, Bascombe stops at a motel only to discover police investigating and cleaning up after a murder in an adjoining room. As he gawks at the proceedings, a fellow observer, an African American trucker named

Tanks, strikes up a digressive conversation that repeatedly eludes Bascombe's pretensions to contractualism. Although Tanks and Bascombe share superficial similarities – both have roots in Michigan and are both divorcées – the two have little in common except the ground they briefly share. Ford's use of first-person narration makes explicit Bascombe's attempted division between internal and external selves, as illustrated by his response to Tanks's passing admission that he "figured you guys was all crooks;" although he does take offense – Bascombe considers asking Tanks "his view on moving-van drivers" because realtors "hear plenty of adverse opinions of them in my business, where they're generally considered the loose cannons of the removal industry." Ultimately, however, Bascombe dismisses the gambit because Tanks likely has not "practiced many analytical views of himself" – Bascombe instead explains that his main concern is "avoiding misrepresentation. I wouldn't want to do anything to you that I wouldn't want done to me—at least as far as realty goes" (207, 209). As Ford illustrates with this contrast between the internal wounded Bascombe and the glad-handing external salesman Bascombe, Frank wishes to limit Tanks's potentiality by responding to any claim with canned and insufficient comments.

Undercutting Bascombe's rhetoric about misrepresentation, Ford reveals much of the conversation with Tanks to be a misrepresentation, especially this closing exchange:

"Talk about misinterpreted and not being misinterpreted." Mr. Tanks still has in mind our conversation from before (a surprise).

"Right," I say, not knowing what's right.

"Maybe I'm gon' come down there to New Jersey and buy a big house from you," he announces imperially. I'm beginning to inch away toward my room."

“I wish you’d do that. That’d be great.”

“You got some expensive neighborhoods where they’ll let me park my truck?”

“That might take some time to find,” I say. “But we could work up something. A ministorage up in Kendall park, for instance.”

“We could work on that, huh?” Mr. Tanks yawns a cavernous yawn and closes his eyes as he rolls his big furry head back in the moonlight.

“Absolutely. Where do you park in Alhambra?”

He turns, to notice I’m farther away now. “You got any niggers down there in your part of New Jersey?”

“Plenty of ‘em,” I say.

Mr. Tanks looks at me steadily, and of course, even as sleepy as I am, I’m awfully sorry to have said that, yet have no way to yank the words back. I just stop, one foot up on the Sea Breeze walkway, and look helpless to the world and fate.

“‘Cause I wouldn’t care to be the only pea in the pod down there, you understand?” Mr. Tanks seems earnestly if briefly to be considering a move, committing to a life in New Jersey, miles and miles from lonely Alhambra and lightless, glacial Michigan.

“I bet you’d be happy there,” I say meekly. (209)

Apropos of Rousseau, the external self that Bascombe posits is not his “true” self, the self that is revealed to readers via narration – it is only “surface appeal.” But this notion of appeal all stems from the roles Bascombe attempts to adopt, to limit his behavior (and his responsibility) to that of a realtor speaking with a potential client. When Tanks mentions that he sleeps in his truck, Bascombe immediately imagines the man “snugged up in his high-tech sleep cocoon, decked out (for some reason) in red silk pj’s, earphones plugged into an Al Hibbler CD, perusing a Playboy or a Smithsonian and munching a gourmet sandwich purchased somewhere back down the line and heated up in his mini-micro;” when Tanks asks a vague question about property values in his current hometown of Alhambra, CA, Bascombe offers an enthusiastic “you’re in great shape,” while admitting to himself that “I’ve never been in Alhambra, don’t know the tax base, the racial makeup,

the comp situation or the market status” (202-203). Bascombe’s presumption here, while somewhat outrageous, is appropriate for an agent who is trying to understand his client, taking the barest pieces of information and using them to extrapolate a full figure; but while Tanks does take on some of the trappings of a potential client, he never fully embodies the role, at least not to the extent that Bascombe can read and respond to “appropriately.” Instead, Tanks shifts from potential client to something else, as demonstrated by his abandonment of logistical and practical questions about his truck and move to more problematic issues of the neighborhood’s racial makeup. It is a powerful question of belonging, one that drudges up a myriad of historical, ethical, and sociological concerns, one that cannot be answered with mere population data nor by Bascombe’s platitudinous “you’d be happy here,” as the adverb “meekly” indicates. In the same way the two men physically move away from one another (Bascombe before Tanks, of course), Ford presents a failure of two men being together, interrupted by a contract imposed upon them.

Ford emphasizes the insufficiency of the contract by repeatedly drawing attention to the circumstances of Bascombe and Tanks’s interaction: the murder in motel room in which they are staying. Bascombe claims that he and Tanks “aren’t socializing here” but only “bearing brief dual witness to the perilous character of life and our uncertain presences in it,” and that without the death “there’s no reason for us to stand here together” (202). He intends the phrase to have an air of solemnity appropriate to the situation, framing him and Tanks as uninvolved bystanders, but Ford does not allow the men to enjoy non-participant status. Bascombe’s Emersonian “perfect sweetness the

independence of solitude” is disrupted when the victim’s wife – thrust, like Nellie Nailles on the bus back to Bullet Park, into a world she does not recognize – turns to Bascombe and Tanks, “her companions of a sort,” who watch her “with distant compassion.” The description that follows recalls Levinas’s emphasis on the disruption of the face: “Her face comes up, light catches it so that I see the look of startlement on her fresh young features. It is her first scent, the first light-glimmer, that she’s no longer connected in the old manner of two hours ago but into some new network now, where caution is both substance and connector” (208). Although he recognizes the demand made by the woman’s face – “I, of course, could connect with her – give a word or a look” – Bascombe refuses her on the grounds that “it would only be momentary, whereas caution is what she needs now, and what’s dawning,” and even tries to placate his guilt by limply telling himself that the “lesson of caution” that the wife has learned “at a young age” is “not the worst thing” (208). As this woefully pathetic summation suggests, Bascombe’s irresponsibility is insufficient to the facts of his present situation, which Ford positions as a repudiation of the Existence Period contracts.

Although the murder takes place in a transitory space, far from the solid and safe houses that Bascombe sells in his quiet Haddam, Ford repeatedly draws connections between his suburb and the one in which they now stand, noting that the town he is visiting “would remind anyone but a lifelong Ridgefielder of Haddam, New Jersey – only richer” (196). More strikingly, Ford gives the victim a Cheverolet Suburban, to which Bascombe regularly draws attention, thereby contrasting the mass-produced and materialistic connotations of suburbia to the real human drama that unfolds before him.

The connection between bloody Ridgefield and his own quiet Haddam forces Bascombe to recognize the potential for death within his own neighborhood, meditating on a girl named Clair Devane, a young African American Realtor who Bascombe was “briefly but intensely ‘linked with’ two years ago” and who was “roped and tied, raped and stabbed” inside a property that she was showing (4). If Bascombe’s relationship with Clair was a uniquely suburban experience – the two were brought together by both their spatial proximity and by their shared interest in real estate – so is her death and its lingering questions. The fact that it occurred in a space that Realtors advertised as safe and uneventful leaves residents confused and unsettled. Initially, Bascombe only gives Clair’s murder a passing reference in the opening pages of the novel before moving on to describe the Haddam marching band and local property values. However, he repeatedly refers to Clair throughout the narrative and always describes her, even elements not related to her death, with a sense of confusion. Clair lingers as an unthematizable other for Frank and a direct repudiation of his Existence Period avoidance. Her sudden death – her abrupt shift from Dasein to no-longer-Dasein – leaves Bascombe with a host of unresolvable questions and unrealized intentions. Rather than allow her death to draw attention to the remaining real possibilities in his life, Bascombe, like Frank Wheeler, creates a fantasy version of Clair, and he attempts to frame their relationship as a fleeting dream “entirely founded on Clair’s being a total impossibility.” This characterization reduces her to nothing more “than a featured player in some Existence Period melodrama of my own devising” (215). But Bascombe’s habit of constantly referring to her reveals that Clair’s persistent unknowability rejects this position as a mere character in his story.

Clair's refusal to cohere into a knowable, and therefore disposable, object calls his independence into question.

Through these relationships, Ford allows Bascombe to learn the limits of contractual relations within the suburban sphere. Having shifted from seeing his neighborhood as first a place of evasion and then a place for civil independence, Bascombe finally comes to realize that belonging does not rely on a space, but on authentically responding to the people within it. Towards the end of the book, he asks himself, "is there any cause to think a place – any place – within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence *ever* shelters some spirit of as proof of its significance and ours?" His answer is direct:

No! Not one bit! *Only other humans do that*, and then only under special circumstances, which is a lesson of the Existence Period worth holding onto. We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options ... as gestures of our God-required but not God-assured independence. (442, emphasis mine)

As the reference to "other people" highlights, interruptions by characters like the murdered Clair or the inscrutable Tanks forces Bascombe to accept the contingent communities formed when his ideal spaces are filled with other people who repeatedly reject his contractual ethos of self-reliance and move him from independence to "*in dependence*" (Walker 135). And while the final Bascombe novel *The Lay of the Land* sees him leaving Haddam for the resort town of Sea-Clift and embarking on an equally problematic Permanence Period, Bascombe ends *Independence Day* by entering a crowd

of his neighbors. He builds his identity not by maintaining a predetermined distance, but by immersing himself in “the push, pull, the weave and sway of others” (451).

Bascombe’s immersion into the presence of others might lead one to believe that, in foregoing the disengagement that initially drove him to Haddam, he would need to leave suburbia to find the meaningful relation he now desires. Such a reading, however, simply repeats the strict conflation of space and ethos that his experience rejects. Rather, Bascombe’s shift is not so much a change in perspective, but a recognition of the facts of the location he actually occupies. He wants to immerse himself in people, to relate to others without the restrictions of expectations or predetermined rules. This realization has been anticipated by the first two novels examined in this chapter. Although they did not realize it, Frank and April Wheeler wanted escape from unsatisfying and inauthentic relationships, not from the location itself, as such behavior is just as likely in France as it is in New England. And the Nailles will undoubtedly encounter unpredictable others who will make demands that cannot be deflected by Elliot’s new drug habit or Nellie’s return to stable family life. The anti-contractualism driving these novels suggests that people come to suburbia to have their lives entangled with the lives of their neighbors, and that this entanglement is the source of an authentic existence. Residents come not to isolate themselves but to form relationships with other people, and the inevitability of death – a theme that will appear in nearly every fiction I will examine – makes authenticity impossible in relationships mediated by CC&Rs or other social contracts. As these novels suggest, suburbia is a different type of living space because of the type of

relationships that are fostered there, relationships based on the reality of neighbors whose lives affect each other.

Notes

1 For a history of racism in suburbia, see Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*; Kamp, “The History Behind *Hansberry v. Lee*,” Keating, *The Suburban Racial Dilemma: Housing and Neighborhoods*; Kushner, *Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America’s Legendary Suburb*.

2 See Frey, “Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs: Racial and Ethnic Change in Metro America in the 2000s.” One of the more compelling notes in Frey’s study is that as the child population in America grows, “family-friendly suburbs [become] even more alluring to racial and ethnic minorities” (2).

3 In place of government regulation, contracts have become the primary form of administration within the suburbs. For geographer Jon C. Teaford, the limited involvement of state and federal governments is part of suburbia’s allure, as homeowners believe that CC&Rs reflect the interests of actual residents better than laws developed by a bureaucratic legislature. “[T]o millions of Americans who wished to stake out their own spheres,” Teaford argues, suburbia provides “diverse ways of life away from the restrictive authority of big-city assessors, health authorities, and police, and removed from the corruption, congestion, and stressful hubbub of the central city” (41). Similarly, Robert Jay Dilger describes HOAs as “private governments” that “generally meet the expectations of [its] members, real estate developers, and local government officials” (158). Even communitarian Daniel A. Bell, who recognizes the very real threat HOAs pose to the public sphere, acknowledges that a liberal democratic society gives people “a right to freely associate in communities not governed by such virtues as fraternity and social equality,” and therefore, “[i]f people want to form hierarchical and exclusivist communities ... they have a right to do so” (168).

4 Beth A. Rubin and Greg Hill both turn to suburbia as examples of the social contract in action. J. Eric Oliver’s *Democracy in Suburbia* and Thad Williamson’s more recent *Sprawl, Justice, and Citizenship* invoke Locke and Hobbes to describe suburbanites’ tendency to “conceptualize citizens as basically autonomous, egoistic, and rational beings who submit to state control only to safeguard their collective well-being” (Oliver 192-193). And while Scott Donaldson believes that suburban contracts misapply the individualist, agrarian spirit of Jefferson and Thoreau, Milette Shamir and F.M. Coleman consider the relation between subjectivity and nature in the American transcendentalists a forerunner to suburban land development and contracts.

5 Rousseau explains this in “On the Social Contract” by observing, “In every body politic there is a maximum force that it cannot exceed, and which has often fallen short by increasing in size. The more the social bond extends the looser it becomes, and in general a small state is proportionately stronger than a large one” (167).

6 See Lee, *A Body of Individuals* and Bluefarb, *The Escape Motif in the American Novel*.

7 For example, when Whitman, in the poem “To A Stranger,” fantasizes about a passer-by, he recognizes the way he, in turn, becomes a fantasy for this stranger: “You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass — you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return” (7). However, the phrase “in return” and the poem’s closing imperatives – “I am not to speak to you [...] I am to think of you when I sit alone, or wake at night alone [...] I am to wait” – frame the interaction as a contractual agreement, in which the actors freely exchange equal goods and are bound by pre-determined conditions (9-11).

8 Michael P. Moreno describes the Wheelers as “grey flannel rebel[s]” and David Castronovo and Steven Goldleaf claim that the protagonists do little more than “live in a cloud of vague yearnings” (89,38).

9 This problem is highlighted in the novel’s title which, Yates stated in an interview, was intended to suggest “that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties” (Henry and Clark 66). Given this invocation of the heavily mythologized American Revolution, it might be tempting to say that Yates is mourning the loss of the communal spirit, like Robert D. Putman will do 50 years later. However, the novel’s treatment of community, and communal myths, is more complex than a simple historical legend could provide. Rather than valorize them, the novel positions myths as something that distracts people from one another, thereby undoing and not affirming community.

10 Taylor Carman makes a distinction to the familiar translation of Dasein that I use, which is worth noting here. Rather than think of Dasein as a simple existing, Carman argues that the Heidegger intends the word to be “more eventlike than objectlike, its ‘being’ more like a gerund than a substantive” (41). This distinction emphasizes the specificity of Dasein, so that when Heidegger makes claims like “Dasein is its disclosedness,” Carman claims that the phrase does not indicate the way an individual sets out an identity that he or she wishes to perform. Rather, the phrase indicates the specificity of place around the subject: “particular Daseins are particular livings of particular lives” (42).

11 While Taylor does allow for “absent partners,” people whose ideas and actions inspire us without our ever having actually met or interacted with them, an identity still requires the interaction from a real, face-to-face other to respond to an identity being enacted by an individual.

12 For a detailed examination of Cheever's difficult relationship to suburbia, see Wihite, "John Cheever's Shady Hill, Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Suburbs."

13 It is important to note that Swami Rutuola is not actually a foreigner – he was born and raised in Cleveland. But because he does not live in the suburbs, the Swami seems like a foreigner to the Nailles.

14 "Always an astute observer of contemporary American society, Ford finds the realty profession to be the ideal vehicle for commenting on the rootlessness and sense of longing that are characteristic of an increasingly mobile population" (Guagliardo 23).

15 "Emerson claims we are always becoming; no 'finally arrived' or 'you've become' category is affixed to the equation. But while Frank knows 'Self-Reliance' and can handily quote at will a pithy theorem for living, he twists the philosopher's 'being-becoming' concept to his own solipsist view of the world. [...] Instead of Emerson's being-becoming theorem, Frank formulated the life axiom of 'being-seeming.'" (Chernecky 170).

CHAPTER III

NOT IN MY BACKYARD: PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE NEIGHBOR IN THE SUBURBAN IMAGINATION

At the climax of the 1961 *The Twilight Zone* episode “The Shelter,” Dr. Bill Stockton and his family huddle inside the bomb shelter they built in their basement, hoping that it will protect them from both the oncoming Soviet planes and from their neighbors’ attempts to break down the door. The escalation is a classic *Twilight Zone* twist, as the episode opened with quite a different scene: Dr. Stockton and the same neighbors who now threaten him gathered in his kitchen to celebrate his birthday, proclaiming him a good friend, a skilled physician, and an integral part of the community. I open with “The Shelter” because the story highlights important aspects to narratives about private property. First, “The Shelter” illustrates the two dominant conceits about property in the United States: those that imagine the house as fortress against invaders – “a man’s home is his castle,” as the saying goes – and those that use property to welcome specially chosen intimates. These concepts simply reduce the contractualism discussed in Chapter One to a smaller set of associations, operating according to a logic that maps the distinction between knowable signatories and dangerous non-signatories into a separation between internal friends – those invited into the home – and external enemies from whom the house provides protection. More

distressingly, these theories posit one's neighbors as that invading enemy, always already outside one's door and prepared to do harm. Second, "The Shelter" also features a trope repeated in many suburban fictions, in which characters are left homeless, either by force or by choice. As with the counter-contractualism examined in the previous chapter, this homelessness theme repudiates the logic motivating American property discourses. In these stories, characters use their property to establish a subject position above and against others, but when that property is abandoned or destroyed, the characters experience a different, more ethical type of relation, in which the neighbor is welcomed and cared for despite the danger inherent in the hospitable act.

In this chapter, I shift my focus from the differences between suburbia and other living spaces to the distinction between those inside and outside an individual's house, tracing the dominant approach to property to two related philosophical traditions: the emphasis on the exterior as defense stems from the classical liberal tradition, in which property is an extension of social contract theory; the second notion, which imagines property as a space for intimacy and nurture, correlates to the concept of dwelling advanced by Heidegger and Arendt. While the latter approach might seem less antagonistic, both theoretical models posit identities formed in solitude, separated from all but a qualified few, an assumption critiqued and transformed by moments of hospitality in suburban fiction. This chapter details these transformations, beginning with T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*; although the two books seem to have very different plots and conflicting views of private property – Boyle's novel describes the increasing violence caused by the construction of a gate

around an affluent neighborhood on the Mexico/California border, while Lee's story features a mild-mannered Asian immigrant who uses his house to assimilate into his suburb and distract from his own checkered past – they both highlight the antagonism inherent in these philosophies. But as I will demonstrate, both novels also refigure the role of property in suburban relationships, imagining homes as places of welcome, not as a means of defense. This redefinition has implications for the figure of the neighbor, which – drawing from the ethical philosophy of Levinas and Esposito and from studies of the neighbor in Kenneth Reinhard, Eric L. Santer, and Jeremy Waldron – I explore with a reading of *Rabbit Redux* by John Updike. I will argue that although others are impossible to predetermine and therefore frightening, they must be welcomed. Private property can be used to provide this welcome, thereby transforming the suburban home from a defense against enemies into a shelter for neighbors.

War in the Living Room: *The Tortilla Curtain*'s Porous Border

Several factors influenced suburbia's expansion from a privileged location for the wealthy few to the dominant residential model in the U.S., including the development of the highway system and increased industrial efficiency in World War II, but the primary motivator was the concept of private property. While Americans have debated the role of property since the colonial period, the topic became particularly prevalent during the 20th century. President Herbert Hoover made the issue a central goal of his administration, and began to institute programs to increase owner-occupancy even while serving as Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge. From his "Better

Homes” movement to his 1928 campaign slogan, “A car in every garage and a chicken in every pot,” Hoover insisted that private property was integral to the American ethos and devoted himself to improving the country’s housing. However, Hoover was not interested in mere shelter, nor did not intend to increase public housing; rather, when the President touted “better homes,” his assumption was “that a better home was an owner-occupied home.” (Ronald 140).¹ Despite the institution of programs like the Federal Home Loan Bank, Hoover’s attention to a specific type of house and neighborhood – giving preference to “all-white, all-Protestant neighborhoods” and “segregated subdivisions, enforced by deed restrictions, and sometimes separated by walls from neighborhoods where people of color resided” – resulted in fewer successes, and any meager gains made were soon undone by the Great Depression (Hayden 125). Hoover’s efforts did succeed in whetting the public’s appetite for home ownership, which only increased in response to depression-era foreclosures. The question of home ownership became integral to Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms, prompting him to include a housing credit in the 1944 GI Bill. But as GIs began returning from the front, often with a young families in tow, this credit only exacerbated the demand and lead to a full-fledged housing crisis.

In response, legislators proposed public and private solutions. The most prominent public solution was the Greenbelt project, a government-sponsored development in Maryland, designed to be “surrounded by a belt of open land to prevent sprawl” and to be “characterized by decent housing and a high level of social and educational services” (Jackson 195). As opposed to the individualism associated with

modern suburbia, “[c]ooperation encompassed every aspect of town life” in Greenbelt; “residents organized transportation, created citizens’ associations, founded a journalism club that put out the local newspaper, and established baseball teams, a dramatic club and a credit union. Meetings took up so much of people’s time that in 1938 residents passed a town motion declaring a meeting moratorium from Christmas to New Years Day” (Baxendall and Ewen 73). Worried that public housing would diminish rental rates and home sales, a number of interested parties opposed the project and advocated private housing, including developers Abraham Levitt & Sons. The Levitts had their own solution to the housing crisis, namely their Levittown subdivision in Long Island, and they joined other developers to engage in a smear campaign designed to discredit the notion of public housing.

The Levitts found a powerful ally in Senator Joséph McCarthy, who presided over the hearings of the U.S. Senate Joint Committee Study and Investigation of Housing. Already exhibiting the staunch anti-communist stance for which he is now known, McCarthy made the housing crisis into an ideological battle. Where the private housing industry had been criticized for “its outmoded methods and inability to provide mass housing,” the government was “experienced in building low-income housing, and the public (and most members of Congress) assumed the government would continue to provide public housing for working- and middle-class renters” (Baxendall and Ewan 91). Against these assumptions, McCarthy and the Levitts invoked the Hooverian ethos of private homeownership as a type of achievement and indication of individuality. Public housing would inevitably lead to an erosion of personal responsibility and self-

sufficiency, they argued, but private property would help strengthen the individual, wither government dependence, and even combat the oncoming threat of communism; as William Levitt proclaimed, “No man who owns his own home and lot can be a communist” (qtd in Kushner xiv). McCarthy’s arguments – and political gamesmanship – proved more effective than those in support of public housing: “The housing hearings served as a public forum to attack government-sponsored public housing, alleged lazy and inefficient union laborers, local building codes, and gray marketeers,” resulting in a “new coalition forged between political conservatives and the master builders [which] would define the parameters of suburban postwar housing” (Baxendall and Ewan 104). The Greenbelt project was soon shut down, while Levitt and Sons established two more Levittowns in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, instituting a model that would come to dominate American residential landscape.

Given the history of private property in the United States, it is no surprise that McCarthy’s rhetoric better resonated with Americans. Although the country’s founders certainly debated the methods of establishing and regulating private property, the concept itself was never in question.² Among the many sources from which Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton drew to construct the country’s property policies, the clearest single influence was John Locke, the theorist who best “furnished a clear-cut rationale for independence from England” (Siegan 47). Unlike his fellow social contract theorists Hobbes and Rousseau, Locke insisted that property existed in a state of nature, prior to the establishment of society or government. As explained in *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, Locke believed that the common becomes private when mixed with

the “*labour* of his body, and the *work* of his hands, which are both properly his” (19, emphasis original). Locke frames this appropriation as a moral good, as it fulfills God’s command to cultivate and make use of creation: “[t]he common is of no use [...] he who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind” (19, 23). Locke’s property theories “planted the seeds for a perspective about the sanctity of human rights that in time bore fruit in the formation of a limited constitutional government,” which remained potent long after the Revolution and guided the debates about the ratification of the Constitution (Seigan 49).

The Enlightenment philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose thought influenced the American transcendentalists and mirrored the founders’ liberal individualism, expounds on Locke. Kant does not define property as a right because, he claims, “[f]reedom (independence from being constrained by another’s choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law, is the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity” (30).³ One can exercise this freedom by asserting that an external thing belongs to him or her, to the extent that “I could be wronged by another’s use of a thing *even though I am not in possession of it*” (37). If one person could be wronged when another uses an external thing, Kant notes, then private property necessarily places all others “under obligation to refrain from using that object of my choice, an obligation no one would have were it not for this act of mine to establish a right” (44). In the state of nature, no such agreement is possible and property is limited to what one physically possesses; but in civil society, these agreements are enforced by a greater will, that of the government: “So it is only a will putting everyone under

obligation, hence only a collective general (*common*) and a powerful will, that can provide everyone this assurance” (45). This tension between individual freedoms and the rights of others is a key point of convergence between Kant and the founders, as both he and “Revolutionary-era Americans, demanded reciprocal dependence so that no free citizen had ‘rights of coercion over others which are not symmetrical with their rights over him’” (Shain 188).

This relation between freedom, restriction, and property advocated by Locke and Kant informs not only American political rhetoric, but American literature as well, which often portrays property as the cause of all manner of conflict.⁴ Battles over property open and drive much of James Fenimore Cooper’s 1823 novel *The Pioneers*, as Natty Bumppo’s house serves as site of conflict where he defends his property from the meddling of a local legislator. Not much later, Frank J. Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* describes a race riot in Philadelphia in which the protagonists defend themselves by turning the house into a literal fortress, storing guns in the kitchen, hiding civilians in the closet, and firing on attackers from the upstairs bedroom window. Similar contests of ownership bookend Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*, as white supremacist Major Delamere makes his stand against racial integration by refusing entry to African American Dr. Miller. Stories as diverse as James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Richard Mattheson’s *I Am Legend*, and William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* invoke horror by describing menacing assailants invading the house and terrorizing homeowners. The trend is even more apparent in the recent genre of suburban fiction. As Cathrine Jurca says of Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, another house-centric novel, in suburban fiction,

“The boundaries between outside and inside, public and private, are already under assault” and continue “to shape what is meant by *home*” (66). Consider the intra-suburban violence marking Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” and Joyce Carol Oates’s *Expensive People*, or the disorder outside Junior’s house in Charles Burns’s *Big Baby*, not to mention slasher films like John Carpenter’s *Halloween* or Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

The violence prevalent in these property-centric narratives is not a mere genre convention. Rather, I suggest that these stories reveal the antagonistic nature of liberal theories of private property. Like the contracts discussed in the previous chapter, these theories begin with the assumption of an enemy, of an attacker who wants to steal or destroy the property of others. This defensive stance informs many American stories about property, and becomes particularly evident in fictions set in the suburbs – a well-populated domestic space in which neighbors interact on a daily basis. One of the more powerful examinations about the liberal approach to property is T. C. Boyle’s 1995 novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, which depicts the escalating struggle between Delaney Mossbacher, a self-proclaimed liberal humanist living in the upscale Arroyo Blanco Estates, and Cándido Rincón, an illegal immigrant struggling to scrape together enough money to rent an apartment. Despite their attempts to avoid one another, the two men find themselves frequently thrown together, and each considers the other a threat to his property.⁵ Most of Boyle’s novels explore the shortcomings of idealists, and certainly critics have read *The Tortilla Curtain* as a satire of upper-class Democrats. However, I contend that Boyle’s sharpest critique is reserved for the desires and actions associated with land

tenure, as Cándido and Delaney (and in fact every character in the novel) are thrust into conflict with one another, despite their initial indifference toward one another, because they pursue private property.

Although certainly exaggerated for dramatic effect, I do not consider the conflicts featured in *The Tortilla Curtain* anomalous; in fact, I assert that they are a logical extension of liberal property rights. Consider Kant's explanation of the relational nature of property claims: because a physical object "has no reason and no means to object to its relation to the possessor," Kant states that private property laws "do not legislate the relation between an individual and an object but an individual *against others* who make claims to an object" (59 emphasis mine). When one gains property, Kant states, the possessor gains not the right to the actual object, but rather a right

against a person, namely right against a *specific* physical person, and indeed a right to act upon this causality (his choice) to *perform* something for me; it is not a *right to a thing*, a right against that *moral person* which is nothing other than the idea of the *choice of all united a priori*, by which I alone can acquire a *right against every possessor of the thing*, which is what constitutes any right to a thing. (59)

In other words, the right to property necessarily requires a restriction against others and binds their freedoms. This antagonism is equally clear in Locke's thought; although he distinguishes between the pre-social state of nature and a Hobbesian "state of war" – an inevitable condition of "*enmity and destruction*" between those who come into contact with one another – his description still emphasizes the potential for conflict. Locke characterizes the pre-social savage's independence in terms of the processes by which "*one man comes by a power over another*" when the latter violates the law of nature, a

right extended to every man who “*hath a right to punish the offender and be executioner of the law of nature.*” But when entering into society, these “governors of *independent communities*” agree “together mutually to enter into one community, and make one body politic” (10,13-14 emphasis original). In contrast to both the state of nature and the state of war, society is positioned as an antidote to fighting: “To avoid this *state of war* ... is one great reason of men’s putting themselves into society, and quitting the state of nature” (16). Prescribing society as a deterrent to aggression, Locke frames others nearby – neighbors – as nothing more than aggressors *en potentia*, restrained only by the conventions of society. One comes to the other, then, not as a necessary part of making a life – property and labor all exist prior to socialization – nor as a necessary element of one’s consciousness.⁶

This assumption of unessential others provides a central theme in Boyle’s satirical rendering, as he puts the language of exclusion and contract in the mouths of blissfully unaware suburbanites who conceive of themselves as agents similarly executing their rights as citizens. The central conflict stems from a proposal to build a gate around the neighborhood for vague reasons of “safety” and “property values,” and Boyle repeatedly undermines his characters’ platitudes with a plot that throws the characters together, refusing any type of exclusion and, therefore, redefining the terms by which property gains its meaning. Consider the following scene, late in the novel, in which Delaney encounters a Mexican named José Navidad, who has (unbeknownst to Delaney) been hired to distribute fliers advertising an upcoming neighborhood association meeting.⁷ On the surface, Delaney’s comments to him seem ordinary to any property owner expelling a

trespasser: “I want to know what you think you’re doing here ... This is private property. You don’t belong here;” but, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Boyle is invoking and deconstructing liberal contractualism. The odd, overly qualified nature of the first part of Delaney’s injunction foregrounds the epistemological stakes of his command, asking not what José is actually doing, but rather what he “thinks” he is doing. The distinction assumes that José is intrinsically in error – his presence is empirically wrong, a mistake on José’s part – and, more importantly, puts Delaney in a position of judgment; regardless of the answer José gives, Delaney has already decided, as the free indirect discourse leading up to the quotation reveals, that he imagined that José had stolen “the Cherrystones’ silverware in there, their VCR, Selda’s jewelry” (228). The formulation highlights the division of power inherent in the relationship between the two, as Delany – who first takes notice of José – operates as a perceiving Same (to use Levinasian terms) who accuses the other he notices (“I want to know”), not allowing him to explain himself or present himself on his own terms, but only to confirm or deny Delany’s hunch.

Delany strengthens his demand by invoking his “right” to accuse in the second half of his comments, beginning with the observation, “This is private property.” By reminding José that they stand on private property, Delany not only invokes the law – thereby threatening a presumably illegal immigrant – but also of his own rights of privacy, to limit one off and to remove one’s self. Delany therefore considers himself a type of sovereign in relation to José, and Boyle’s narration underscores the domineering arrogance Delaney practices in response to the “invader;” by simply sharing proximity,

Dalaney assumes, José is “mocking him, bearding Delany right there in *his own* community, right there on *his own* street” (228, emphasis added). The last line in Delany’s rebuke – “You don’t belong here” – reemphasizes Delany’s assumed sovereignty and puts it in spatial terms; by assuming the right to tell José that he does not belong in that space within Arroyo Blanco Estates, Delany also asserts his own position as one who does belong and one who enjoys all attendant benefits, including the right to remove. And so, within this small passage, Boyle recalls liberal notions of property by understanding property as a right against someone else: it is Delany’s, and therefore cannot be José’s.

But even as he calls upon this language, Boyle immediately works to undermine and satirize the logic, starting with the very space on which Delany stands. José trespasses not on Delany and Kyra’s territory, but on that of his neighbors the Cherrystones.⁸ All of the evidence that Delany marshals, then, and the ontological position he assumes is undone by José’s presence, particularly when the accosted man reveals the contents of his satchel – not the Cherrystones’ possessions, but fliers that he had been hired to distribute. More than a simple gag or a moment of cosmic justice against Delany’s temerity, the reversal reveals a fundamental flaw in liberal contractualism – the assumption that all involved are clearly identifiable agents who have “signed” the contract. These moments of confusion become a reoccurring theme throughout the novel: realtor Kyra takes possession of a house she is selling for out-of-town clients, invoking homeowners’ rights to chase away trespassers; “illegals” like José, Cándido and América are regularly hired and brought into the neighborhood to perform

manual labor; Boyle even devotes an entire subplot to a wealthy an embezzler under house arrest in the suburb. These confusions of insider/outsider – or, to use Schmitt’s terms, “friend/enemy” – status complicate the entire notion of a wall, highlighted by Delaney’s lament that the wall “might keep *them* out, but look what it keeps in” (224). His indistinct use of pronouns is telling; the liberal pursuit of private property, as exemplified by Locke and Kant, has resulted in a widespread mistrust of the one’s neighbor, forcing residents to consider everyone a potential enemy.

Boyle uses this confusion to give tension to the novel’s climax, in which Delaney confronts Cándido at his camp in the valley:

Because at that moment something fell against the side of the shack, something considerable, something animate, and then the flap was wrenched form the doorway and flung away into the night and there was a face there, peering in. A gabacho face, as startling and unexpected and horrible as any face leaping out of a dark corner on the Day of the Dead. And the shock of that was nothing, because there was a hand attached to that face and the hand held a gun. (351)

Boyle’s inversion here is obvious, making the one who once proudly asserted his rights as a property owner into the type of invader he cursed. Moreover, where his paranoia heretofore compelled him to conceive of others as enemies in waiting, mistaking landscapers for thieves and murderers or framing Cándido, whom Delaney hits with his car in the opening pages, as a “jack-in-the-box who’d popped up in front of his bumper and ruined his afternoon,” Delaney and his gun now pose a real, empirical hazard to Cándido and his home (7). But Boyle shows little interest in simply exchanging the oppressor for the oppressed, and instead highlights the antagonistic nature of the combatants’ property claims. By locating the narration in Cándido’s perspective, Boyle

positions him as the property-owner who assumes an antagonistic right; moreover, the narration highlights the ocular evidence of the observing Cándido, whom objectifies the invading Delaney, repeatedly calling him “something” and describing his “gabacho face” as “startling and unexpected and horrible.” Boyle underscores the confusion by switching back and forth between the two men’s perspectives as the shack and its occupants are swept away by a mudslide. The dueling focalizations make the confrontation not just a struggle against nature, but a battle of antagonists as the ground they wish to claim washes out from underneath them.

The shifting perspectives amidst a wildfire and mudslide that destroys the property underscores the impossibility of liberal contracts, which – in one form or another – posit government as a means for defending property. The presence of unknowable others, inside or outside the confines of the suburb, throw the entire notion of agency and contract into question: legally, Cándido has no right to put his shack in Topanga Canyon; morally, Delaney has no right to destroy the Rincón’s shelter and expose an infant to the elements. But contracts do not apply here, as they are not the self-interested, rational participants assumed by Locke or Kant. Rather, like the characters in *Independence Day* or *Bullet Park*, they are constantly in relation to each other. As has happened throughout the novel, the two should have nothing to do with each other, and yet there they were, sharing proximity and entangled in each other’s lives. Boyle reinforces this point in the novel’s final lines; as Cándido realizes that his child has died, he notices a “white face spurge up out of the black swirl of the current and the white hand grasping at the tiles.” Although Delaney is an enemy who has raided his home and who

was indirectly responsible for the death of his daughter, although he embodies the very threat suburbanites envision and used to persecute immigrants like the Rincóns, Cándido “reached down and took hold of it,” thereby saving Delaney’s life (355). Cándido’s actions operate according to a form of relation otherwise to the antagonism that has dominated the novel, an interdependence distinct from “the novel’s formulaic representation of cultures as self-contained and sharply delineated, asymmetrical worlds” (Schäfer-Wünsche 405). Although certainly less antagonistic, this alternative logic is not some sunny, “Pollyanna” optimism – Cándido’s decision to take Delaney’s hand excuses or solves nothing: Delaney’s house has still been destroyed and his neighbors have still turned against him; Cándido is still not welcome in the U.S. and his daughter is still dead. But Delaney’s need compelled Cándido into responsibility and as the only one present, Cándido could not avoid that responsibility. Throughout *The Tortilla Curtain* the defense of private property pushed neighbors into conflict with one another; and yet at the end of the novel, after the property has been destroyed, they behave not as antagonists asserting rights, but people in proximity – neighbors.

A Quantity Known: Stasis and Dwelling in *A Gesture Life*

Where the citizens of Arroyo Blancos Estates obsess about securing their neighborhood and look upon non-whites with suspicion, Franklin “Doc” Hata – the Korean-born, Japanese-raised narrator of Chang-rae Lee’s 1999 novel *A Gesture Life* – discovers that, despite being the only Asian homeowner in all-white middle-class suburb of Bedley Run, “it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn’t

unwelcome” (2-3). In fact for Doc Hata’s neighbors, his ethnicity has become “both odd and delightful to people, as well as somehow town-affirming” (2). Of course, this acceptance was not simply bestowed upon him by the virtue of his existence; rather, it was something Doc Hata had to labor to earn. Aware from the beginning that he was “a foreigner and a Japanese” living on a white, middle-class American street, Hata strove to meet and even exceed his neighbor’s expectations, so that his presence does not frighten the homeowners, but gives them “the reassuring thought of how safe they actually were, how shielded, that an interloper might immediately recognize and so heed the rules of their houses” (44). Doc Hata not only heeds the rules of his neighbor’s houses, he internalizes them and gains his acceptance by establishing his own house, a “two-story Tudor revival at number 57,” which he renovated from a dilapidated relic into “one of the special properties in the area” (16). For the citizens of his town, which underwent its own economic reformation in the 1960s and changed its name from Bedleyville to the “more affluent-sounding” Bedley Run, Hata’s project of self-improvement and self-possession embodies the suburban ethos of autonomy – literal self-naming – and of individualism.⁹ When a Realtor declares, “Doc Hata *is* Bedley Run,” she indicates the extent to which he has mastered the art of being a good neighbor and property owner (136).

Doc Hata’s project of self-improvement through home ownership reflects an important aspect of American approaches to private property, just as prevalent as the security theme discussed in the previous section. Recent popular exposés like Daniel McGinn’s *House Lust* or Michael Ruhlman’s *House: A Memoir* correlate home

ownership with identity, describing the house as “a still and contained center” from which communities and histories expand (Ruhlman 220). According to Witold Rybczynski, these associations are unsurprising because modern notions of privacy and intimacy were founded with the development of the bourgeois home, with the advent of rooms devoted to solitary efforts like study, bathing, and procreation. In as much as the home is a fortress that defends individuals from external invaders, it is also an interior space of warmth and intimacy, in which individuals can construct their identities behind closed doors, free from the demands of outsiders or the larger public. This ideology imagines the home as safe, exclusive to a select and verifiable few.

The division between exterior and interior even informed property debates between America’s founders, as Lockean liberalism was challenged by a republicanism preferred to the common over the private. Following James Harrington’s Utopian vision in *Oceana*, some early Americans – including, to varying degrees, Jefferson, John Adams, and Madison – advocated a republican tradition that “stressed the importance of the politically engaged citizenry active in a small community. It was a political philosophy committed to popular government, political liberty, and a relatively equal distribution of wealth or property ownership within a political community” (Schultz 16). In fact, opposition to a strong federal government, which remained fervent even after the failure of The Articles of Confederation, stemmed partially from a desire to preserve property rights and the fear that such a government would redistribute their land. Among Madison’s great successes in drafting the Constitution was his ability to marry the republican concern for the larger community to the liberal emphasis on individual

freedoms. Madison performed this alchemy by highlighting the necessity of private property as a bond with the community, thereby connecting the republican concern for “public virtue” to “private virtue, which itself rested upon the faith that individuals could bring themselves to subordinate their narrow self-interest to the interest of the community at large” (Katz 203).¹⁰

This division between the public and private, the *oikos* and the *polis*, has long been a mainstay of political philosophy. As Hannah Arendt explains in her genealogy of the *vita activa*, ancient Greeks and Romans affirmed the essential separation between the public and private spheres; the public sphere, manifested in the *polis*, was the space of plurality and engagement with difference, while the private sphere, manifested in the *oikos*, was the space of the hidden and confidential. Where engagement with the *polis* was required for a full life – “a life spent in the privacy of ‘one’s own’ (*idion*), outside the world of the common, is ‘idiotic’ by definition,” Arendt reminds readers – the city was filled with difference and was therefore dangerous; in the household, conversely, one could be “primarily concerned with one’s own life and survival” (38, 36). However, the enlightenment’s valorizing of equality and the authentic subject muddles the separation between public and private – in response to this exposure, Arendt argues that the concept of the intimate has risen to oppose the social. The intimate, Arendt explains, performs the crucial requirements that once belonged to the private, in which the essential but immaterial activity of labor can be achieved. In Arendt’s estimation, labor – the biological and intelligent human activity most closely associated with consciousness and

identity construction – must be performed in isolation, without the demands of the public sphere and of society.¹¹

For Arendt, the modern concept of private property is implicated in the rise of the social. In fact, Arendt argues that society was founded by “an organization of property-owners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth” (68). Despite this detrimental element of property, Arendt believes that it has become necessary precisely because it has abolished the private. After the establishment of society,

the four walls of one’s private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard. A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense. The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in. (71)

Because the intimate requires a space to act without demands, to test one’s potentiality, private property the most reliable protection from neighbors.

Arendt derives this notion from her teacher Heidegger, who asserts that dwelling is an essential part of being human. In his “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger identifies homelessness as the primary affliction of modernity, the result of both technology and the priority of action over thought associated with Sartrean existentialism. For Heidegger, homelessness “consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought”

(*Basic Writings* 252). In response, Heidegger calls for a “homecoming,” in which individuals rediscover their grounding through authentic dwelling, the process by which humanity gives meaning to the spaces and objects with which one factually interacts: “The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell” (363). Heidegger further expounds on this philosophy in “Building Thinking Dwelling,” describing dwelling and building – of occupying and developing a piece of land – as a way of securing what he calls “the fourfold:” the earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. In other words, dwelling and building give a land meaning by associating a people with the land they possess and by making objects like buildings and houses. Because dwelling “is always a staying with things,” it is the private object, away from the demands of the social, in which the personal identity is formed and prepared to interact with the exterior world (353).¹²

The concept of dwelling figures heavily in American domestic fiction, which enjoyed great popularity among 19th century middle class women. These bildungsroman novels depicted a heroine’s development into womanhood, a process of identity construction took place within the domestic sphere.¹³ As demonstrated in the genre’s most well-known entry, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, domestic fiction is greatly invested in the moral development of its characters and readers, and usually employed sensationalist plots in which sentiment influenced behavior – think of Little Eva on her death bed, crying for the effect slavery has had on her father’s eternal salvation. In her recent study *Neodomestic Fiction*, Kristin J. Jacobson argues that though elements of the genre still continue, novels after 1980 have shifted from stories

that imagine stability and safety in the home – that tend to “categorize the home as either a haven or a trap” – to those that “promote, rather than attempt to resolve, instability and heterogeneity” (31, 29). For Jacobson, Chang-Rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* is one such “queered” novel.¹⁴ The story of a single man raising an adopted daughter and meticulously caring for his esteemed house, *A Gesture Life* illustrates the inherently unstable nature of neodomestic fiction. Jacobson claims that Hata’s “views on homeownership ... suggest that where he tweaks suburban alienation to his advantage, he reproduces suburban control ... When Doc Hata paints his estranged, adopted daughter’s bedroom, his penchant for control, perfection, and, by implication, domestic security emerges” (174-175).

I would like to slightly adjust Jacobson’s claim to argue that Hata’s need for control is a byproduct of his project of identity construction, which begins with his house. As he tells readers, “in regarding one’s own house or car or boat one can discover the discretionary pleasures of ownership ... and thus have another way of seeing the shape of one’s life, how it has transformed and, with any luck, multiplied and grown” (136-137). Hata identifies with his house and with the act of housekeeping so strongly that when a small fire in his den puts him in the hospital and forces him to use subcontractors to make the repairs, he experiences “the peculiar sensation that this inspection and showing is somehow postmortem, that I am already dead and a memory and I am walking the hallways of another man’s estate” (139). To be sure, part of this domestic attention stems from Hata’s desire to enact the neighborhood contract, but even that behavior is part of the “good neighbor” identity he cultivates, as these demarcations serve as the primary

terms of interaction between his fellow residents.¹⁵ In Bedley Run, he explains, “being neighbors means sharing the most limited kinds of intimacies, such as sewer lines and property boundaries and annual property tax valuations ... on the whole an unwritten covenant of conduct governs us, a signet of cordiality and decorum, in whose ethic, if it can be called such a thing, the worst is to be drawn forth and disturbed” (44). Doc Hata’s housekeeping, then, is based on the Arendtian distinction between the interior and exterior: by keeping his home in good condition and participating in the rules and expectations of the other citizens, Hata can enjoy peace and solitude.

According to the logic of dwelling, Hata has successfully employed his property. After coming to the country as a stranger, Doc Hata applied his labor to an unwanted tract of land and respected the expectations and regulations of his neighbors, and has therefore found acceptance. Furthermore, he has not only left war in the East to make a life for himself in the safe and respectable suburbs, he extended the fruit of his success to others, adopting a Korean orphan named Sunny and giving her a privileged life in the U.S. He brings her into his home, thereby providing shelter for her and a space to enact his identity as a benevolent father. Doc Hata reflects on this achievement early in the novel, acknowledging that he has

always wished to be in a situation like the one I have steadily fashioned for myself in this town, where, if I don’t have many intimates or close friends, I’m at least a quantity known, somebody long ago counted. Most everyone in Bedley Run knows me, though at the same time I’ve actually come to develop an unexpected condition of transparency here, a walking case of others’ certitude, that to spy on me on my way down Church Street is merely noting the expression of a natural law. *Doc Hata*, they can say with surety, he *comes around*. (21)

But where his property and propriety have allowed him to become this “quantity known,” a symbol of his neighborhood’s diversity and individuality, Doc Hata admits that his life has become somehow unsatisfactory. The long-strived for rapport he has crafted has become “discomfiting” and he finds that the “happy blend of familiarity and hominess and what must be belonging is strangely beginning to disturb me” (21-22). Hata’s admission undermines the promises of domesticity, as the very things that are supposed to give him a rich life – including an enclosed private space from which he can form a public persona – have become dissatisfying and confining.

Lee foregrounds the source of Hata’s unhappiness with a striking intertextual passage. After his usual swimming routine is interrupted by a moment of existential nausea – “I suddenly have the thought that I’m not swimming in my own pool at all, but am someplace else, in a neighboring pool or even a pond” – Hata seeks solace by retreating into his house, where he recalls a short story “about a man who decides one day to swim in other people’s pools, one after a another in his neighborhood and town, which, as described, seems very much like Bedley Run” (23). The story is, of course, “The Swimmer” by John Cheever, and Doc Hata’s identification with the protagonist Neddy Merrill is revealing. Hata and Merrill do share some surface qualities, as both are intensely private and wish to avoid society’s unnecessary excesses; but where Hata finds even the possibility of swimming in someone else’s pool sickening, Cheever’s Merrill eschews property rights and embraces impropriety, climbing over walls, going through gates, and pushing aside hedges. Merrill’s improper behavior would be unthinkable for Hata, and while it does ultimately cost him his home – he returns to find the lights off, the

doors locked, and the place abandoned – it also opens him to a new relation with his neighbors, one that goes beyond the usual alcoholic daze of cocktail parties.

By invoking Neddy Merrill, Lee draws a stark distinction between his protagonist and that of Cheever and reminds readers that the former undergoes a type of transfiguration while Hata remains unhappily familiar, is that Merrill experiences literal ecstasy (*ex-stasis*) while Doc Hata stays cloistered within “in the *peerless* quiet of the pool” (23 emphasis mine). For philosophers like Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy, consciousness requires ecstasis, as the event moves the subject from solitary ipseity to a recognition of a reality beyond one’s individual subjectivity. According to Levinas, the all-objectifying Same who reduces everything to his or her understanding does so because he or she has no true relation: “this relation does not become an implantation in the other and a confusion in him, does not affect the identity of the same, its ipseity, does not silence the apology, does not become apostasy and ecstasy” (*Totality* 41-42). For Nancy, who insists that community is “neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself, and the spacing of the experience of the outside, of the outside-of-self,” ecstasy is the basis of community and of selfhood. The consciousness of the limits of one’s subjectivity “– or this communication – is ecstasy: which is to say that such a consciousness is never mine, but to the contrary. I only have it in and through the community... community is the ecstatic consciousness of the night of immanence, insofar as such a consciousness is the interruption of consciousness” (*Inoperative Community* 19). Nancy’s philosophy directly contradicts the notion of dwelling by Arendt and Heidegger, who claim that imminence comes from shunning

others and digging into a particular plot of land. For Levinas and Nancy, however, others are required for identity; it is exposure, not exclusion, that makes the self.

So when the static Doc Hata realizes that it is time to leave Bedley Run, he reveals a key problem within the notion of dwelling: the solitary life is unfulfilling. While Arendt retains the Ancients' disgust for a completely isolated life, her division between intimate and social spheres simply refigures the liberal's emphasis on the pre-social self, imagining the self formed in isolation from others. Arendt frames the influence of others into the private as a type of homogenizing "mass hysteria," under which "we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor." Though they are all "imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience," it is an oppressed subjectivity, under which only one perspective is permitted (58). When Arendt claims that property is vital to exclude the public or when Heidegger valorizes a piece of ground, they assume the presence of voyeurs looking upon the subject and they believe that this gaze harms the self. These thinkers characterize the exposure to others as a laying bare, a nakedness before a firing squad of observers, and never consider that exposure might be integral to the identity formation process. Even Heidegger who, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, insisted that all consciousness is in relation to the factual world, invokes an egocentric approach to property.¹⁶ As Donald J. Gauthier explains, Heidegger's emphasis on the home space informs his ethics, in which he traces the term "ethics" to "ethos" or "abode," thereby defining it as an allegiance to one's country. In building structures in which Dasein dwells and constitutes a self, Gauthier notes, "the

builder's relationship with the earth takes precedence over his relationship to the other" (109). To dwell, to form the self, then, one must exclude and hide from others.

For his part, Hata has good reason to hide from his neighbors. Before becoming Doc Hata of Bedley Run, he was Lieutenant Jiro Kurohata of the Japanese Imperial Army, a medical officer charged with preparing "volunteer" Korean comfort women to perform sexually for his fellow soldiers. Employing a rhetoric of military decorum, Kurohata not only avoids recognizing that these women were kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery, but also he rebuffs the pleas from a comfort woman named K, with whom he forms a relationship. This history reveals Hata's Bedley Run project of identity construction to be nothing more than an attempt to avoid responsibility for prior actions, to distance himself from the loveless father or inhumane soldier that he has been. The house serves as a facade to distract from that past and to maintain facile, gesture-based relationships with his neighbors, in which he will never have to worry about exposure. So while Hata might find his current identity too confining and unsatisfying, it does have the advantage of evading a terrible past. However, the evasion does not last and, as with *The Tortilla Curtain*, private property proves to be a poor defense from interactions with others. Ultimately, Hata's good neighbor identity is undone by interruptions from bad neighbors, including his rebellious daughter Sunny.

The first interruption comes from fellow Bedley Run homeowner Mary Burns, with whom Hata has a brief romantic relationship. By the time he and Mary meet, Hata had well developed his distancing gestures, but instead of simply accepting his externals, "Mary Burns, somehow, decided to breach that peace with [Hata]" employing a Neddy

Merrill-like impropriety: Mary breaks the “buffer of fine landscaping and natural vegetation, of whitewashed horse fence and antiqued stone walls” and steps on the lawn to speak with Hata, “doing nothing to camouflage or otherwise hide” (44, 48). Where Mary’s actions force Hata to recognize the insufficiency of his polite exterior, her attempts to engage with him emotionally draw attention to the ethical stakes of his behavior. As a widower with significant familial problems, Mary needs more from Hata than a swimming companion and a weekend date, but whether the topic of conversation is the inevitability of death or Mary’s difficulties with Sunny, Hata refuses to give anything more than pat answers. And while Mary eventually wearies of trying to pry an honest reaction from Hata, their relationship has a lingering effect on him, eventually providing the means for his reunion with Sunny. This unavoidable disruption makes Mary a bad neighbor by Heidegger and Arendt’s standards because she does not allow Hata the peace he wants; her memory haunts him and calls him into question, even after she has left his presence. He cannot exercise his autonomy or choose his identity for himself, because he must contend with the irrepressible thought of her disappointment. In the same way the specter of Clair Devane brought Frank Bascombe into authentic responsibility, Mary proves too puzzling, too infinite, for Hata to merely dismiss. Her memory exposes his poor behavior.

Most importantly, Mary draws attention to Hata’s irresponsible treatment of Sunny, describing her as “a woman to whom you’re beholden ... as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes” (60). Unlike liberal property theories, the concept of dwelling allows for the welcome of outsider, but

one that recalls *xenia* or Kant's highly qualified hospitality, which insists that the guest recognize and not disrupt the subject's development of self-hood. Doc Hata assumes that Sunny will be just such a house guest when he adopts her, looking for someone to whom he can transfer "the ambivalent ethical relation between Doc Hata and K to the adoptive relation between Hata and Sunny" (Jerng 53). And while he never verbalizes his disappointment, Hata does admit that he wishes she were "somewhat appreciative of the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of the orphanage – the best of which can be only so happy – to an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America, with a hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means" (73). But instead of aiding Hata's identity project, Sunny rejects his behavior, publicly misbehaving and questioning his intentions; like Mary, she refuses to be a figure in Hata's solitary subjectivity project, and in fact levels the most direct attack on her father's performance: "You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness," she charges, claiming that his neighbors regard him as nothing more than a "'good Charlie' to organize the garbage and sidewalk-cleaning schedule" (95). Strikingly, Sunny abandons Hata's well-maintained house, the house that he believed would protect her and provide her with the many advantages for which she should be grateful, and chooses instead to live in Ebbington, the depressed and poorly-maintained neighborhood adjacent to Bedley Run. In fact, even when Sunny and Hata begin to repair their relationship and she allows him to spend time with her son Thomas, Sunny still insists that Thomas can never come to Hata's house. These rejections and demands put forth an ultimatum: if Hata wishes to have a relationship with Sunny and

Thomas, it cannot be on his terms and, therefore, cannot be determined by the identity he constructs through his housekeeping.

According to Hamilton Carroll, “Hata’s attempt to write himself into the nation fails because it is displaced by the return – as traumatic subjects – of the people he abjects in the constitution of his narrative,” and while Carroll refers largely to K and Sunny, I would include Mary in the category, as she also displaces Hata’s acceptance (595-596). More specifically, the radical hospitality insisted by “bad” neighbors Mary and Sunny confound the interior/exterior distinction that establishes the concept of dwelling. Strictly speaking, they are enemies to Hata’s identity project, as they reject his claims and interrupt his behavior. More than entry and safety, they demand response, to be part of the “sacredness of the hidden ... the darkness of the underworld” that Arendt considers so important (61). By the end of the novel Hata, dissatisfied with the hollow gesture life that he’s built for himself, does not reject the invaders – he joins them. Realizing that his inauthentic, irresponsible identity is rooted in his house, Hata chooses to sell it, to abandon the life he had carefully constructed and to enter the larger world. In the novel’s closing lines, Hata declares,

Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will already be on a walk someplace, in this town or the next one or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home. (356)

In the end, Doc Hata has moved from dwelling in his house to dwelling in the world, being in the world. By abandoning his property, Doc Hata similarly abandons his propriety and chooses to become a citizen of the world – not the contractual, Enlightened

agent conceived by Kant, but a dependent and relational self. By engaging with others and not hiding behind the gestures of good neighbor-ness, Doc Hata takes responsibility for who he is, for what he has done, and thereby responds to the factuality of the world around him. No longer stuck in his pool, Hata rejects his stagnant existence and experiences the ecstatic.

Running in Place: Property and Impropriety in *Rabbit Redux*

Raymond Carver's oft-anthologized story "Cathedral" posits a use for private property that differs from those advocated by Locke and Kant or Arendt and Heidegger. Throughout the story, the unnamed narrator complains that his wife's longtime friend, a blind man called Robert, will be coming to stay in his house. The narrator considers the invitation an affront to his rights as a homeowner and resents having to change his lifestyle to accommodate a disabled person. However, during their first night together, the narrator extends a modicum of hospitality toward Robert when, while watching a television program about cathedrals, he attempts to explain the images on screen. When the narrator's descriptions falls short – "The truth is," he explains, "cathedrals don't mean anything special to me. Nothing." – Robert suggests that they learn by drawing one together: Robert puts his hands over those of the narrator, who performs the sketch with his eyes closed (372). Where the narrator spent most of the story disgusted with the notion of even touching Robert, he now acquiesces, and the event shocks the narrator and alters his perceptions, leaving the previously pugnacious homeowner speechless and grateful. As befitting an attempt to understand a religious structure, the encounter brings

the narrator into the presence of something ineffable, something unknowable and infinite. Crucially, the narrator foregrounds the importance of the house in his retelling of the incident: “My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything” (375). The narrator’s movement from house to cathedral reveals a change in his concept of the home space: by allowing Robert to disrupt his assumptions – to displace his sovereignty as homeowner, to touch and relate to him – the narrator realizes the ecstasy of the infinite.

Although the narrator only achieves a metaphorical homelessness, Carver’s story belongs with other suburban fictions about the loss of property. These stories feature the destruction or abdication of home and yard, but I do not believe that they necessarily reject the notion of property. Rather, I argue that they assert moments of critical hospitality, which reveal a longing for the improper ecstasis undergone by Carver’s narrator. To achieve this ecstasy, suburbanites must redefine their concept of the neighbor from a potential enemy kept away by fences and yard lines to an other on whom the subject relies.

Jeremy Waldron, himself no stranger to the question of private property, offers just such a redefinition in his reading of the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan.¹⁷ Against usual categories of neighbor-ness that put greater emphasis on fealty and similarity, Waldron argues that neighbor-ness is determined by proximity:

The idea is that these three travelers are each bound morally to the man who fell among thieves by virtue of being in his immediate vicinity – in his “neighborhood” (in the crudest geographical sense of that term) when he is in desperate need. Never mind ethnicity, community, or traditional categories of neighbor-ness. They are there and that makes them his neighbors. (348)

Proximity also alters the ethical duties of those involved, as the Priest and the Levite who passed by the injured man committed no evil until they “went out of their way” to avoid helping him (343). Noting that “there was no antecedent special relationship between the man who fell among thieves and the Samaritan that might ground a traditional duty to rescue” – and in fact, the races of the two men made them enemies – Waldron insists that this lack “doesn’t mean that their relation was wholly abstract;” rather, Waldron explains that the relationship between the Samaritan and the injured man “at that time and in that place was morally significant in its particularity, and special by virtue of the immediate concrete circumstances of their encounter at that particular moment in that particular place” (346). According to Waldron’s position, the neighbor is an ethical, spatial designation, not a legal status, and therefore anyone with whom one shares space becomes one’s neighbor, and cannot be evaded because of Kantian *prioris* or Heideggarian antipathy.

Waldron’s redefinition corresponds with recent work by Kenneth Reinhard and Eric L. Santer, who advance a political theology of the neighbor. Both Reinhard and Santer borrow the philosophy of Carl Schmitt, which asserts that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology” (*Political Theology* 36). In his search for the secular miracle, Santer argues that the commandment to love the neighbor is as important as the commandment to love God, and therefore the neighbor has the same right to suspend the law as the sovereign. Like the sovereign, the encounter with the neighbor is a secular miracle, which disrupts normality and undoes any sense of communal unity. Because “there is really no such thing as self-analysis; one cannot give

to oneself the possibility of new possibilities,” the neighbor’s role is paramount: “Something must *happen*, something beyond one’s own control, calculations, and labor, something that comes from the locus of the Other” (123). Similarly, Reinhard imagines the neighbor as “a mode of political relation that would not be based on the friend-enemy couple, but on the neighbor as a third term, one that is obscured by Schmitt’s binary opposition, but that is no less central to religious discourse, sociality, and political theology” (13). The neighbor “materializes the uncertain division between the friend/family/self and the enemy/stranger/other,” located on the intersection between the Schmittian injunction to expel the enemy and the Biblical command to love the enemy (18). Where Schmitt’s theory is based on a boundary – albeit one that can be transgressed by the sovereign decision – Reinhard describes the neighborhood as a place that is “infinite in its openness, its lack of boundaries, and its *lack of* obsession with the otherness of the other” (70). But even then, the neighbor is a particular, a limit based on the proximity of space, of the face to face. As a mix between the ethical and the political, the neighbor is the infinite other made particular by the presence of the ineffable.

The redefinition given by Waldron, Reinhard, and Santer recalls the ethics of Levinas, who states that the “responsibility for the Other ... commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and make me approach him, makes me his neighbor,” thereby provoking “this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage” (*Otherwise* 11).¹⁸ This command by the other means that the neighbor cannot be excluded, even by the conventions of law or morality, but must be welcomed into the home of the subject and must be given shelter. Levinas’s insistence

on welcoming the homeless separates him from Heidegger, his forerunner and greatest influence. Like Heidegger and Arendt, Levinas asserts the primacy of the home space, claiming that dwelling “is not the simple fact of the anonymous reality of being cast into existence as a stone one casts behind oneself; it is a recollection, a coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge, which answers to a hospitality, an expectancy, a human welcome” (*Totality* 156). But Levinas insists that the “privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement,” because the “inwardness” of subjectivity “opens up in a home which is situated in that outside – for the home, as a building, belongs to a world of objects. But this belongingness does not nullify the bearing of the fact that every consideration of objects, and of buildings too, is produced out of a dwelling” (152-153). By emphasizing the “worldliness” of the home, the fact that it is not a solitary possession but, as Kant reminds us, a claim made in relation to others, Levinas underscores subjectivity’s reliance on, not opposition to, neighbors:

The Other – the absolutely other – paralyzes possession, which he contests by his epiphany in the face. He can contest my possession only because he approaches me not from the outside but from above. The same can not lay hold of this other without suppressing him. But the untraversable infinity of the negation of murder is announced by this dimension of height, where the Other comes to me concretely in the ethical impossibility of committing this murder. I welcome the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him. (171)¹⁹

Where alternative property theories frame the neighbor as an invader or a voyeur, Levinas posits the neighbor as a necessary element of the home and, by extension, the self. Where Heidegger frames the self as a type of rootedness and connection to the land,

Levinas counters that the home “is the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering [*errance*] which has made it possible, which is not a *less* with respect to installation, but the surplus of the relationship with the Other, metaphysics” (172). Therefore, while the self is certainly constituted within the shelter of the home, the home is not a shelter *from* the neighbor but a shelter *for* the neighbor:

The possibility for the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home, as closed doors and windows. Separation would not be radical if the possibility of shutting oneself up at home with oneself could not be produced without internal contradiction as an event in itself, as atheism itself is produced – if it should only be an empirical, psychological fact, an illusion. (173)

Once again, the neighbor is not a legal designation, but a present other who carries the indications of infinity. It is this concept of the neighbor portrayed in Carver’s “Cathedral,” the unwanted other whose presence in the house both undoes the rights of the property owner and provides the miraculous exposure to infinite.

Despite Carver’s intriguing depiction, the absolute welcome advocated by Levinas and others raises a number of questions that the short story simply does not address. In hopes of providing a larger discussion, I would like to close this chapter with a reading of John Updike’s *Rabbit Redux*. At first glance, *Rabbit Redux* might seem like an odd text to find such an argument, as the novel, and in fact all of Updike’s Rabbit Tales, have a reputation for being sexist, racist, and jingoist.²⁰ While that characterization might be true, I contend that these undesirables represent the wildly untethered ego of Updike’s protagonist Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, who, as a middle-class male, occupies not only a national normative position, but a suburban normative position.

But where the common reading of the Rabbit novels understand Harry's egoism as a consequence of his running, his escape from the crowding presence of others, I argue that, in *Rabbit Redux*, his egoism stems from his house and neighborhood. This centrism motivates Rabbit's decision to allow Jill, an under-aged prostitute who ran away from her upper-class family, and Skeeter, a troubled black Viet Nam veteran, into his house. But while Harry intends to use his house to exert his moral and social superiority over others, his exposure to Jill and Skeeter alters his perceptions. As present and infinite neighbors, the two exceed Harry's expectations, disrupt his moral high ground, and break his identity as accepted neighbor. Harry loses his house in the process, but he gains a new and more ethical subjectivity, one that responsibly engages with others.

Without question, property plays an important role in each of Updike's Rabbit novels: *Rabbit*, *Run*, *Rabbit Redux*, *Rabbit is Rich*, *Rabbit at Rest*, *Rabbit Remembered*.²¹ Most readers tend to focus on Harry's restlessness, emphasizing his penchant for running from familial, moral, and spiritual responsibilities, and while some critics have championed Rabbit as a continuation of American individualism, aligning him with Huck Finn, George Willard, and other great American escapees, other commentators have seen him as a grotesque critique of middle-class American values.²² Indeed, in an oft-quoted passage, Updike himself claimed that his mission was to "transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities" (*Assorted Prose* 186). He puts the matter more directly in an interview with *Time*, declaring,

My subject ... is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without

doubt to examine what it is. (*Conversations* 11)

But more than a middleness, I argue that *Rabbit Redux* displays a centrism, a position of power that Harry occupies because of his property status, situated between the upper-class Penn Parks and the lower class Brewer and Mt. Judge.

Harry clearly demonstrates this centrist attitude when, at the outset of his relationship with Skeeter and Jill, he treats them as nothing more than representative enemies; positioning them as something on the dangerous fringe, he sees himself as a bastion of, if not the good, then at least the norm. Updike vividly illustrates this judgment with the fantasies Harry entertains as he rides the bus from downtown Brewer back to the suburbs:

It's as if, all these Afro hair bushes and golden earrings and hoopy noises on buses, were the seeds of some tropical plant sneaked in by the birds who were taking over the garden. His garden. Rabbit knows it's his garden and that's why he's put a flag decal on the back window of [his car] even though Janice says it's corny and fascist. In the papers you read about these houses in Connecticut where the parents are away in the Bahamas and the kids come in and smash it up for a party. More and more this country is getting like that. As if it just grew here instead of people laying down their lives to build it. (13)

For Sally Robinson, Harry derives this hostility from the “increased visibility of women and people of color in Rabbit’s world,” which have in turn heightened awareness of his own privileges as a white male, attention that “brings with it a loss of power, as the norm is revealed to be contingent and its position fragile” (345). Faced with the growing social enfranchisement of minorities and women, and with the impression that “the new heroes of American culture are not ‘ordinary’ white men like Harry, but the various groups who organize collectively around rights and against injustices,” he tries to tap into “the well of

Middle American alienation and ‘disenfranchisement,’ and imagines himself as a victim because he is white and male” (350). Furthermore, Harry’s garden narrative – in which African Americans are foreign scavengers and rich liberals are derelict groundskeepers – frames him as not just a victim but a defender of the good, a role bestowed upon him by his status as a homeowner.

By basing his selfhood in his suburban home, the mod cons at Harry’s disposal transform him into a King in his castle: offending garbage is swept away (sometimes leaving a sweet stink “because the Penn Villas sewers flow sluggishly”), food is at the ready and quickly prepared (even by a husband whose wife is working late), and a myriad of images leap from the screen into Rabbit’s fantasies (25). Moreover, as if to advance Updike’s mission to “transcribe middleness,” Harry’s neighborhood Penn Villas is located between the urban Mt. Judge/Brewer area where he once lived and Penn Park, the affluent inner-ring suburb he longs to join. Harry considers his inclusion in the thoroughly middle-class subdivision a personal achievement, allowing him to abandon the Brewer of his youth to uncivilized minorities, to his dying mother, and to his impotent father, who he dismisses as “one of the hundreds of skinny whining codgers in and around this city, men who have sucked this same brick tit for sixty years and have dried up with it” (4-5). Conversely, Harry maintains a complicated, Babbitt-esque relationship with Penn Park, sometimes desiring the company of its residents – he expresses relief when a couple from the upper-class neighborhood joins him in an unfamiliar restaurant – and later proclaiming, “I hate those Penn Park motherfuckers ... If I could push the red button to blow them all to Kingdom Come ... I would” (285). Harry’s centrism, then, the

position that calls him to battle the encroaching others, is based not just in his race, gender, or class but in his role as a suburban homeowner.

Although he does not necessarily articulate an overt plan – and in fact questions himself immediately after allowing them to stay – his homeowner status informs all of his initial interactions with Jill and Skeeter. His visit to Jimbo’s Friendly Lounge, the bar where he first meets the duo, is predicated on this distinction, as his co-worker invited him there and introduced him to Jill because he “lives in this fancy big house over in the fanciest part of West Brewer, all by himself, and never gets any tail” (132). The language of homeownership permeates his first thoughts of Jill: “*She’ll ooze in the letter slot,*” he thinks upon seeing her, and explains her defensive attitude as “pulling rank” because “[h]e is Penn Villas, she is Penn Park” (129). When they return to his house, Harry counters Jill’s aggressive sexuality by directing her through the rooms of his house:

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“Take off your clothes here.”

The command startles her; her chin dents and her eyes go wide with fright. No reason he should be the only scared person here. Rich bitch calling his living room tacky. Standing on the rug where he and Janice last made love, Jill skins out of her clothes ... She treads lightly on his carpet, as if watchful for tacks. She stands an arm’s-length from him, her mouth pouting prim, a fleck of dry skin on the lower lip. “And you?”

“Upstairs.” He undresses in his bedroom, where he always does; in the bathroom on the other side of the partition, water begins to cry, to sing, to splash. (142-143)

Similarly, Skeeter appears in Harry’s house as a “set of shadows in the old armchair [that] has been with them ever since their marriage” (205). Property metaphors shade everything from Skeeter’s taunts – “I screwed your bitch” – to Harry’s justification for hostility toward Skeeter, comparing their altercation to lifting “the metal waffle-patterned

lid on the backyard cesspool, around the corner of the garage from the basketball hoop” (209, 208). Harry ends this fight by physically beating Skeeter until he becomes another object in the living room: “His enemy is cringing on the floor, the carpet that cost them eleven dollars a yard and was supposed to wear longer than the softer loop for fifteen that Janice wanted ... cringing expertly, knees tucked under chin and hands over head and head tucked under the sofa as far as it will go” (211).

But Skeeter and Jill never remain objects or furniture in Harry’s house, and their mere presence is enough to disrupt his expectations, making his act of utilitarian hospitality into an act of critical hospitality. Harry’s kindness, much like his antagonism, relies on his homeowner status, a position revoked by his neighbors, as the residents of Penn Villas burn down the Angstrom house with a fire that kills Jill and sends Skeeter on the run from the police. As his sister Mim blithely summarizes, all Harry’s goodness earned him was “a burned-down house” (358). In losing the house, the possession from which he derives his identity, Harry has been rendered homeless and his sense of self forever altered: he might make his coveted move to Penn Park in *Rabbit is Rich*, but he remains keenly aware that the house belongs not to him, but to his bitter mother-in-law and increasingly independent wife, an independence she secures by becoming a successful Realtor in *Rabbit at Rest* and “Rabbit Remembered.” The strongest indication that Harry has fundamentally changed occurs late in *Redux*, when he admits to Janice “I feel so guilty ... About everything” (406). Harry’s admission sharply contradicts his refusal during his daughter’s funeral at the end of *Run* – “Don’t look at *me* ... I didn’t kill her.” – and indicates “that Rabbit has been led back to a place where he may start a life in

which claims of the outside world interact with the imperatives of his inner reality” (311; Campbell 132).

As a decentering, potentially destructive force, the neighbor in *Redux* recalls Levinas, for whom guilt and interrupted subjectivity are the inevitable result of encounters with the other. Much of Levinas’s narrative of the self and other mirrors Harry’s interactions with Skeeter and Jill: from his normative perspective, Harry allows Skeeter and Jill to enter his house, their stay includes a series of teach-ins (according to Levinas, “The first teaching of the teacher is his very presence as teacher from which representation comes”), they gratify their egoism to a point of gross impropriety, and this indulgence results in the destruction of the house and the loss of Harry’s centrism, forcing him to recognize his responsibility toward those around him. (*Totality* 100). Furthermore, this similarity helps address the quandary that Skeeter poses for readers. A self-styled “Black Jesus” who peppers his apocalyptic prophecies with snippets of American history and inner-city slang, Skeeter is arguably the most controversial figure in Updike’s oeuvre;²³ Skeeter has a certain redemptive power for Harry in that he “teaches” him of things beyond the simple perceptions of centrism that marked his earlier behavior, challenging his assumptions about the Vietnam war and forcing him to read Douglass and Fanon until these writers “penetrated Rabbit’s consciousness” (Prosser “Updike, race” 79). Some have interpreted Harry’s acquiescence as an inert passivity, but Harry does in fact engage with his guests: he contradicts Skeeter’s rants and Jill’s proclamations, and responds to arguments he finds distasteful. To the extent that they

alter Harry's beliefs about things that occur outside his door, Skeeter and Jill redeem and restore him.

Skeeter's full redemptive power manifests in both his historical lectures and through the impropriety that undoes any claims to morality that Harry might make. This impropriety climaxes in a scene in which Skeeter goads Jill into having sex with him in front of Harry, convincing the trio to perform a scenario discussed during their teach-ins. "You is a big black man sittin' right there. You is chained to that chair," Skeeter tells Harry; "And I, I is white as snow." Likewise, Jill assumes the role of an "ebony virgin torn from the valley of the river Niger" (296). Mimicking the subjective behavior of a slave trader at auction, Skeeter directs the action:

"Now," he sings, and his voice has become golden hoops spinning forward, an auctioneer who is a juggler, "we will have a demon-stray-shun of o-bee-deeyance, from this little coal-black lady, who has been broken in by expert traders working out of Nashville, Tennessee, and who is guaranteed by them ab-so-lutely to give no trouble in the kitchen, hallway, stable or bedroom!" Another soft slap, and the white clay dwindles; Jill is kneeling, while Skeeter still stands. (297)

The scene is all carnivalesque excess, in which the three conspirators indulge their basest desires while simultaneously being mastered by the other participants. Skeeter is sexually dominant, forcing Jill to perform for him and intimidating Rabbit into non-participation; but by portraying a lecherous slave-owner, he reenacts the history of exploitation he claims to deplore. Jill is both a victim of male power and a manipulator, who initiated the sessions and complies with its dark turn to secure drugs and shelter from the two men. Equally enamored with Skeeter's body as he is of Jill's, Harry gains a vicarious thrill by simply watching the two copulate; but he gets the opportunity only by

becoming the enslaved, a piece of property within his own house. The actors then are both dominating and dominated, excited by the chance to gratify their egos and frightened by the disturbing lengths to which they will sink.

In Levinasian terms, the participants “enjoy” the act, which is a prerequisite for encountering the absolute other. Levinas argues that the enjoying perceiver, perusing his or her own desires, is shocked by the sight of the other’s face, which demands a response: the face of a neighbor “signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract” (*Otherwise* 88). Accordingly, the teach-in gone bad ends when Jill sees a face peering at them through a window, an exposure that transforms the trio’s relationship to one another and begins to undo Harry’s power as a homeowner. Where he once dominated over Jill and Skeeter, he now finds himself excluded: he tries to watch Skeeter inject Jill with heroin, who refuses his request, commanding, “You go upstairs, Chuck. I don’t want you to see this;” later, when Jill comes to bed and Harry attempts to reclaim his role as protector by taking her to a doctor, Jill shrugs him off, saying, “It’s too late for you to try to love me” (300-301). In fact, the face in the window literally becomes the means for Harry’s unhousing, as it belongs to the son of Mahlon Showalter, who already came to the Angstrom house with fellow homeowner Eddie Brumbach to demand that Harry eject Skeeter from the neighborhood. Despite his attempts to assert his homeowner’s rights – “I’ll keep my kid from looking in your windows, and you keep yours from looking in mine” and “He goes when he stops being my guest” (289-290) – Harry cannot prevent Showalter and Brumbach from returning and burning down his house. His property made him the incarnation of

American values, but Harry's relation to his neighbors has left him homeless and property-less, a suspect in the eyes of others.

Strengthening the metaphorical conflation between property and subjectivity, Updike illustrates a change in Harry with two scenes at the novel's end, which tie his altered self to the loss of his home. The first scene finds homeless Harry forced to return to his parents' house in Mt. Judge – the place he had heretofore abandoned and avoided – sitting in his childhood bedroom and trying to imagine a suitable object for his masturbatory fantasies. Although he conjures several possibilities – his most recent sex partner Peggy Fosnacht, his most consistent partner Janice, and even a grotesque “Negress” from the depths of his id – their otherness evades his speculative grasp. He can only climax when an image of Mim and Charlie Stavros collapses into an all-consuming nothingness, and even then, the feeling he once called “a spaceflight” amounts to little more than “rocks thrown at a boarded window” (380). Amidst this failure, an unbeckoned chimera of Jill visits him, at once phantasmal and corporeal: “The minor details of her person that slightly repelled him, the hairlines between her teeth, her doughy legs, the apple smoothness of her valentine bottom, the something prim and above-it-all about her flaky-dry mouth, the unwashed white dress she kept wearing, now return and become the body of his memory” (380). Like his previous dream girls, Jill denies Harry's comprehension: he tries to touch her, but she disappears; he tries to recreate their near-orgy with Skeeter, casting himself as a more active participant, but she refuses. Updike repeats the word “presence” throughout the passage, highlighting her vicinity to him; but it is a receding presence, one that rebuffs any attempts to control or

assimilate her. The simple splitting of strangers and representative enemies that once determined Harry's interactions with Jill have been forever altered. She, and in fact all of the people Harry held within his objectifying gaze, are now unknowable others.

The experience strips Harry of his ontological confidence and forces him to reconstitute his selfhood in relation to those he encounters, starting with his wife Janice. Updike foregrounds Harry's shattered ego by setting their reunion first at the remains of their destroyed house and then in the quintessential property-less space – a roadside motel. Throughout the scene the couple plays with their identities: neither one directly asserts a persona, but each slowly constructs their selves in relation to the other. When Harry checks into the motel and fills out the registry, he characterizes both their title – “Mr. and Mrs. Harold Angstrom” – and their address, their defining space in Penn Villas, as “lie[s]” (400). When Janice asks, “Who do you think you are?” Harry can only answer “Nobody” and admits his great guilt, which encompasses more than regret for his behavior's effect on Jill, Nelson, and Janice; it extends to everyone he meets, even the motel clerk – “He does, he *does* care,” Harry repeatedly insists (405, 406).

Updike narrates these movements with the cosmic metaphors that filled the book, portraying Harry and Janice's rustling on a motel mattress as a celestial dance: “The slither of sheets as she rotates her body is a silver music, sheets of pale noise extending outward unresisted by space” and later, “The space they are in, the motel room long and secret as a burrow, becomes all interior space” (406). But Harry is no satellite hurling across the sky, nor a rocket following a single directive; he is responsive, making his moves in relation to those of Janice, filling and recreating the area between their bodies.

The imagery highlights what has been an important theme throughout the novel: Harry shares his spaces with other people, who reject his egoistic domination and disrupt his assumptions; if he is to continue living among them, he cannot simply – as he declared in *Rabbit, Run* – “have the guts to be yourself” and make other people “pay your price” (157). Rather, he must respond to those who are present, to the neighbors who remain outside of his understanding.

Like so many other suburban fictions, *Rabbit Redux* ends with homelessness, but as I have demonstrated, the change in Harry’s subjectivity helps explain the prevalence of this theme. As a property owner, Harry was combative, egoistic, and alone; he was a self-interested agent exercising his rights and hiding his affairs from the hostility outside his door. In short, he was the manifestation of all the unethical behavior invited by traditional theories of property. But once he was rendered homeless, Harry’s relations shift to something more ethical and complex self. When Harry’s house is destroyed by fellow home owners, or when Delaney becomes an aggressor in Cándido’s tent, or when Doc Hata sells his house to travel around the world, we see authors groping towards a redefinition of relations between property owner and neighbor. Like the narratives that reject the solipsistic identities dictated by neighborhood contracts, these novels reimagine the suburbs as a place for interdependent selves authentically relating to one another. By removing the rights of the property owner, either by violence or by choice, the dependence on the neighbor becomes more clear. The neighbor is no longer someone who comes to steal, who comes to harm or to destroy, who disrupts the development of one’s consciousness. Rather, as indicated most vividly by Cándido’s outstretched hand,

grabbing that of the drowning Delaney, the neighbor is someone necessary, who should be welcomed and defended.

Notes

1 For an informative discussion of Hoover's housing policies, see the articles "Herbert Hoover, Housing, and Socioeconomic Planning" by Fred J. Bjornstad and "No Place Like Home" by Regina Lee Blasczyk, both in the collection *Uncommon Americans: The Lives and Legacies of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover*, edited by Timothy Walch.

2 "What one must stress is that the right to property was an unquestioned assumption of the American revolutionaries. To assert this is merely to assert that they were eighteenth-century men. But one must go on to say that they did not defend property as an end in itself but rather as one of the bases of republican government" (Katz 469-470).

3 A particularly pointed contradiction to Locke appears in Kant's description of the development of land. Where Locke believes that cultivation or development of a piece of land is the event that changes that land from the common to the proper, Kant claims that "developing land is nothing more than an external sign of taking possession, for which many other signs that cost less effort can be substituted." He continues: "Furthermore, may one party interfere with another in its *act* of taking possession, so that neither enjoys the right of priority and the land remains always free, belonging to no one? Not *entirely*; since one party can prevent another from taking possession only by being on adjacent land where itself can be prevented from being, *absolute* hindrance would be a contradiction. But *with respect to* a certain piece of land (lying between the two), leaving it unused, as *neutral* territory to separate the two parties, would still be consistent with the right of taking control. In that case, however, this land really belongs to both in common and is not something *belonging to no one* (*res nullius*), just because it is *used* by both to keep them apart. (52-53, emphasis original).

4 Thoreau's *Walden*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Willa Cather's frontier novels, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Tim O'Brien's *The Nuclear Age* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Home*, John Edgar Wideman's Homewood Trilogy, and numerous works by Steinbeck, Faulkner, Morrison, and August Wilson.

5 Although less openly satirical than most of Boyle's work, at least in the chapters focused on Cándido, *The Tortilla Curtain*'s themes are not unusual for the author. His 1987 work *World's End* conflates land tenure in colonial America with predatory consumption, 1984's *Budding Prospects* features a group of environmentalists who battle for land to cultivate, and in 1990's *East is East* a group of Asian immigrants search for land to settle.

6 The egoism here is not unique to Kant's political philosophy. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke describes identity as the coherence formed by one's self-reflection: the ideas of identity and diversity are not formed by comparing. We do not compare the self to others but "we compare it with itself existing at another time" (296).

7 The name "José Navidad" is a direct reference to Joe Christmas from Faulkner's *Light in August*, another liminal character whose external characteristics trouble his belonging in a racist society. For more see Hicks, "On Whiteness in T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*."

8 As Kathy Knapp observes, the gated community represented in *The Tortilla Curtain* "embodies in miniature the nation's schizophrenic relationship with its undocumented immigrants since homeowner associations typically hire immigrants to maintain shared amenities such as pools, tennis courts, and playgrounds and individual homeowners require personal gardeners, house-cleaners, and nannies" (122).

9 See Moraru, "The Other, the Namesake: Cosmopolitan Onomastics in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*"

10 For a detailed description of Madison's theory of private property and its influence on the shift from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution, see Nedelsky, *Private Property and the Limits of American Constitutionalism*.

11 "Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before. The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves, and while the intimacy of a fully developed private life, such as had never been known before the rise of the modern age and the concomitant decline of the public realm, will always greatly intensify and enrich the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings, this intensification will always come to pass at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men." (Arendt 50)

12 The necessity of dwelling has been refigured by more recent thinkers like Gaston Bachelard and Peter King. Bachelard's best-known work *The Poetics of Space* features a series "day dreams," in which he traverses the house, expounding on the meaning of the corners, the dressers, and the walls. These meditations emphasize the home's sense of seclusion and security; against Heidegger, Bachelard claims that "[b]efore he is 'cast into the world,' as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house" (7). The "day dream" terminology Bachelard employs underscores both the particularly subjective elements of home life and the ability to sleep, to be in repose, while exploring the relation between space and identity. For Bachelard, home is the point

from which all reality extends: “For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word [...] all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (4-5). Similarly, Peter King’s books *In Dwelling* and *On Private Dwelling* explore the necessity of homes for identity construction. Like Bachelard and Arendt, King emphasizes the protection offered by the house – against the uncontrollable plurality of the exterior, the house is stable, knowable and secure. In particular, it becomes a way to regulate relation and choose those with whom one shares intimacy. As in Arendt and Heidegger, Bachelard and King foreground the labor of intimacy and the way property owners exercise control over the house to construct a self.

13 For many years, critics dismissed these novels as hackneyed and didactic popular entertainment, designed for mass consumption of the bourgeois, but the genre has received much greater attention following Jane Tompkins re-reading in 1985’s *Sensational Designs*. Rather than mere idlers or entertainers, Tompkins argues that these novelists “have designs upon their audiences, in the sense of wanting to make people think and act in a particular way,” and were less interested in “embodying enduring themes in complex forms,” as done by Melville or Hawthorne, “but as attempts to redefine the social order” (xi). According to Tompkins, these authors did not consider their relegation to the household as something shameful or weak, but rather as a privilege to influence their husbands and children and thus the polis: “Besides making the home into an all-sufficient basis for satisfaction and fulfillment in the present, they wrote about domestic routines in such a way that everything else appeared peripheral” (169). For others, see Romines *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women’s Fiction*, Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century*.

14 Not coincidentally, each of Lee’s first three novels – *Native Speaker* (1995), *A Gesture Life* (2001), and *Aloft* (2004) – explore this instability within a suburban setting, as suburbia’s obsession with external performance and interior individuality provides Lee with a useful metaphor for infinity and exteriority. Lee contrasts a largely urban story about ethnic espionage in *Native Speaker* against a sitcom suburb, in which protagonist Henry Park finds his attempts to assimilate frustrated by his white wife’s demands, his immigrant father’s foreignness, and the accidental death of his son Mitt. Turning his successful landscaping business over to his son, Jerry Battle of *Aloft* considers the neighborhood a place of endless entanglement and expectation, which he irresponsibly evades by taking to the skies in his commuter plane. Even Lee’s most recent novel 2010’s *The Surrendered*, which splits its time between a Korean village and various urban locales, opens with an image of refugees first seeking shelter in and then looting and destroying a farmer’s house.

15 In her study *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture*, Tina Chen identifies Hata's behavior as an act of "impersonation," a practice unique to post-WWI Asian Americans. Chen distinguishes between acts of imposture and acts of impersonation, observing that stereotypes that regard Asian Americans as either members of a "model minority" (a non-white group who embraces mainstream ideals of upward mobility, politeness, and civic duty) or as potential spies and a "yellow menace" position them as imposters: "frauds who pretend to American identity by performing, with an intent to deceive, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (18). Building off of attempts to "make imposture something other than a mark of foreignness, secrecy, of falsehood," while still recognizing the performative and fractured nature of Asian American identity, Chen rejects "the logic of imposture – a logic biased on binary notions of 'real' and 'fake,'" to suggest that we think of Asian American performance as "a politics of impersonation." Impersonation, Chen argues, offers "more than a way of thinking about the performance of identity as that which is either essentialized or constructed: it affords us a paradigm for considering the mutually constitutive dimensions of identity and performance – the im-personation that is not about performing someone's else's identity but about performing into being a sense of one's personhood" (7-8). Where imposture indicates a stable self under an inauthentic mask, impersonation indicates a dialogic of performance and perception, where both viewing and viewed parties participate in the construction of self.

16 In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Heidegger emphasizes the importance of home related to an ethos: "According to our human experience and history, at least as far as I see it," Heidegger claimed, "I know that everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in a tradition" (*The Heidegger Controversy* 106).

17 See Waldron, *The Right to Private Property*.

18 It is important to note here that the essays by Reinhardt and Santer come from a collection entitled *The Neighbor: Three Essays in Political Theology*. Although Santer, with his focus on Benjamin and Rosenzweig, acknowledges a congruence with Levinas, both Reinhardt and Slavoj Žižek make distinction between his ethics and their theories. According to Reinhardt emphasizes the political nature of his theory which, he believes, "there can be *no relationship* between ethics and politics" (48) Žižek is more critical of Levinas, as he has been in other writings like *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* or "Smashing the Neighbor's Face." Where, in the latter two works, his primary point of contention was the asymmetrical relationship Levinas posits, insisting that the neighbor's proximity can be overbearing to the Self, Žižek shifts his critique in his essay from *The Neighbor*: "In a properly dialectical paradox, what Levinas (with all his celebration of Otherness) fails to take into account is not some underlying Sameness of all humans but the radical, "inhuman" Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of the *Muselmann*, the "living dead" in the concentration camps. This is why, although Levinas is often

perceived as the thinker who endeavored to articulate the experience of the *Shoah*, one thing is self-evident apropos his questioning of one's own right to be and his emphasis on one's unconditional asymmetrical responsibility: this is not how a survivor of the *Shoah*, one who effectively experienced the ethical abyss of the *Shoah*, thinks and writes. This is how those think who feel guilty for observing the catastrophe from a minimal safe distance" (160).

19 As Seán Hand observes, "Levinas then develops this contrast, by pitting the notions of labour and possession which he associates with Heideggarian dwelling, against a vision of the home as a place of enjoyment, of familiarity and intimacy, of welcome and respite. The home can act as an invitation rather than as a protective exclusion. The contrast is mildly extreme, but it is really designed to operate an ethical vision. Heideggarian metaphors of building and dwelling contain within in them, in Levinas's view, a philosophy of anonymous reality and solitary self-establishment and possession; whereas for Levinas, reality from the beginning involves a welcoming of the other. In Levinas's social and ethical vision, then, dwelling and language, are not about imposing, grasping, or founding." (41).

20 Without a doubt, Updike and Levinas are an odd pairing, and one that no critic outside of John Neary (*Something and Nothingness: The Fiction of John Updike and John Fowles*) has made. This seeming incomparability stems partially from Kierkegaard's influence on Updike, a philosopher who, Levinas believed, "philosophized with a hammer." However, there are compelling points of convergence between the two thinkers, particularly their shared deference for the infinite identity and for the idea that truth is a struggle and not a triumph. For more, see the edited collection *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion* edited by J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, particularly Jeffery Dudiak's article "The Greatest Commandment? Religion and/or Ethics in Kierkegaard and Levinas."

21 Harry's initial escape in *Run* is not away from Brewer, but to a new house across town; in *Rich*, Harry feels emasculated because he lives in a house owned by his mother-in-law; and Janice asserts her independence in *Rest* and *Remembered* by becoming a successful Realtor. Additionally, several of the series' characters retell an Angstrom family legend about a squabble between Harry's father and a neighbor, who leave a strip of grass between their yards unmowed because both refuse to take responsibility for it.

22 This position is best summarized by Matthew Wilson's article "The Rabbit Tetralogy: From Solitude to Society to Solitude Again," in which Wilson argues that the tetralogy executes "a complicated interplay between these two 'extreme antagonisms' [of solitude and society]. Moving from the solitude of the fleeing young man to the solitude of the death-saturated older man, the sequence tacks between solitude and society (and achieves a momentary balance in *Rabbit is Rich*), only to have that moment inevitably destroyed by Rabbit's dwindling toward death. Within this interplay, the sequence also reveals an increasing awareness of history, which becomes a subject, almost obsessively,

in the guise of contemporary events, and which is transformed in the final novel into a historical consciousness within Harry Angstrom" (6).

23 Some, like George Hunt, dismiss him as nothing more than "a despicable character," whose only traits are "irresponsibility, cruelty, moral weakness, schizophrenia, and cowardice," while Joyce B. Markle believes that, in the novel's terms, he is the "real Jesus, the Black Jesus" because he is "the only one with beliefs deep enough and a vision of America strong enough to be a priest and life-giver" (Hunt 179; Markle 150).¹⁰ Updike himself subscribed to the latter explanation, saying that "no one's given serious consideration to that the idea that Skeeter, the angry black, might be Jesus. He says he is. I think he probably might be." (*Picked-up Pieces* 510).

CHAPTER IV

FORESAKING ALL OTHERS: MARRIAGE, MONOGAMY, AND OBLIGATION

Suburbia was designed to be a place apart from the city or country, where individuals could own a home and private property, but these provisions exist primarily to provide a space for a family. For thinkers from Aristotle to Arendt, the family is the cornerstone of Western society, and the center of the nuclear family is the conjugal couple. Unlike the assumed communities examined in chapters one and two, the marital couple is a smaller, more intimate union, founded on vows of fidelity spoken directly to the other member. The supposed stability of the marital pact was particularly important in the decade following World War II, when the fear of a Soviet conflict and the resurgent economy compelled young people to find security by redefining marriage according to strictly demarcated gender roles. Even now, 60 years after the establishment of this “neo-traditional marriage,” pundits, politicians, and philosophers assert the model as a means to a more safe and structured society.

Fiction writers, however, have been less eager to praise the nuclear family, choosing instead to interrogate and reconfigure the institution. Consider Ira Levin’s 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives*, a story so popular that its title has become a pejorative to describe subjugated housewives. At the narrative’s climax, protagonist Joanna Eberhart

learns that members of the Stepford Men's Association have been replacing their spouses with servile and sexually-pliant clones, and that she is the next target. During her escape, Joanna encounters her own doppelganger – an unassertive and impersonal, but more physically attractive, version of herself – and, in a moment of terrifying double-consciousness, sees herself as her husband Walter wishes to see her: a simple, thoughtless pleasure machine, designed to limit her own potential to become an unquestioning helpmate for her spouse. Like Levin's other well-known novel *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Stepford Wives* invokes a particularly communal form of terror, the fear of being the subject of a conspiracy. But the real horror of *The Stepford Wives* is the revelation that Walter, who heretofore professed allegiance to the women's liberation movement and supported Joanna's career plans, had orchestrated his wife's replacement since the beginning of the novel. The most basic union – the one on which all other communities rely, particularly in a suburb like Stepford – has been undone; Joanna's husband was not the man he promised to be.

Although unquestionably a piece of early 1970s camp, *The Stepford Wives* is part of a large subset of suburban fiction that critiques the central assumptions of the marital pact – sometimes brutally satirizing the limiting gender roles associated with the institution, and other times imagining adultery as a self-actualizing escape from such constraints – while also providing imaginative models of long-term, committed relationships that account for one another's infinite potentiality. This chapter focuses on portrayals of critical hospitality between husbands and wives, examining stories that reject both the limiting “traditional” form of wedlock often associated with suburbia and

the egoistic “free love” evoked in tales about adultery or key parties. As I will demonstrate, these stories discard the latter two approaches as inhospitable and unwelcoming, and describe instead a form of obligated responsibility, which places non-determining demands on the spouse. I find the first half of this rejection in Tom Perrotta’s satirical novel *Little Children*, which equates the impossible expectations of the traditional marriage to pornographic fantasies, accentuating the sense of duty implied in the conjugal couple. The adultery plot at the center of Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* approaches these fantasies from the opposite angle, framing extramarital affairs not as a form of self-expression or potentiality, but as something selfish and irresponsible. In both of these stories, authors foreground the presence and potential of death to highlight the foolish and selfish behavior of the characters; however, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* offers a different version of the marriage pact, as the presence of death drives protagonists Jack and Babette Gladney into a greater commitment to each other. Foregoing both the demanding constraints of the contract marriage and the egoism of adultery, the Gladneys are a patchwork family, constructed from the pieces of previous relationships, who both bind themselves to each other while still recognizing the other’s unknowable infinity, making explicit the obligated responsibility implied by Perrotta and Moody. As I will demonstrate, these stories refigure suburban marriage from a series of limiting gestures to the beginning of a contingent community founded on responsibility and hospitality.

The Contract(ing) Marriage

The liberal politics and frank sex talk of *The Stepford Wives* might reflect its 1970s setting, but its ideologies are more rooted in the era of Eisenhower than that of Jimmy Carter. The titular clones are exaggerations of the stereotypical 1950s housewife, marketed by Madison Avenue advertisements and memorialized in early sitcoms: the woman who spent her day tending to the house and children to make a safe haven for her husband, who worked outside of the home earning the family wage. For Walter, reverting Joanna back to the 1950s model allowed him to reap the benefits of that era's gender norms, in which he the breadwinner expected to come home to a clean house, well-behaved children, and a sexually available wife. *The Stepford Wives* is hardly the only story to critique these expectations, and in fact the 1950s marriage remains a powerful image that recurs in a number of contexts, valorized in *Leave it to Beaver* or satirized in *Desperate Housewives*, derided as a symbol of repression and socially-sanctioned sexism or heralded as a defense of family values and stability. But despite being a prominent imaginary figure and a political flashpoint, historians contend that the 1950s marriage was in fact an anomaly, both unprecedented and relatively short-lived. According to Elaine Tyler May, the affluence of the 1920s and the austerity of the 30s began the redefinition of gender norms that culminated in the 60s and 70s; it was "the generation in between—with its strong domestic ideology, pervasive consensus politics, and peculiar demographic behavior—that stands out as different" (9). The destruction witnessed during the second World War, coupled with the oncoming threat of the Cold War, spurred Americans to look for security where they could find it, namely in a

retroactively designated “traditional” wedlock. The loose sexual mores of the 20s and 30s, May explains, became considered not only immoral but a threat to national security. As popular media, from screwball comedies like *His Girl Friday* to hardboiled Mickey Spillane novels, retold stories about liberated women wreaking havoc in the workplace and aiding Communist saboteurs, young Americans sought security through what May calls “domestic containment” – using the home space to establish a sexually demarcated set of American ideals. As Jessica Wiess notes, this ideology “was rooted in widely accepted gender roles that defined men as breadwinners and women as mothers. Many believed that a violation of these roles would cause sexual and familial chaos and weaken the country’s moral fiber.” (117). And while some young women were reluctant to forego the rights and pleasures their mothers have earned – to say nothing of the men who shuddered at the prospect of the long hours and emotional isolation required by a strict separation of spheres – many considered the stakes too great. The omnipresence of death and war made all other pursuits seem frivolous.

But whatever the power of these social forces, Weiss insists, the 1950s marriage was constructed by willing participants. In addition to the sense of security it provided, this compact also allowed individuals to express their sexual identities and achieve personal goals. The marriage pact assured each member a partner for their endeavors, and while that did of course require one to relinquish some potential goals, many young marrieds determined that the good outweighed the bad, at least initially. This emphasis on the companionate union, in which two free individuals come together to make a pact, forced couples to rethink their relationship from a form of socially-supported duty – in

which external forces like the state, the church, and the extended family came to aid and direct the new couple – to the actions of two solitary agents. As a result, marriage became considered an individual's work, the manifestation of independent choices. The stereotypical 1950s marriages of Harriet Nelson or June Cleaver

obscures the fact that the decade encompasses only a single stage in the family cycle of that first generation to form families after the war – the parents of the baby boomers. Their children, the boomers, grew up and went to school, then off to college and independent lives, and parents' lives evolved with these changes and historical circumstances. (Weiss 2)¹

Against May, then, Stephanie Coontz argues that this focus on work and personal happiness makes the 1950s marriage not an anomaly, but rather the culmination of a process that began with the 19th century development of the middle-class. Pre-Romantic Period coupling was largely an economic and social function, designed to determine the “rights and obligations connected to sexuality, gender roles, relationships with in-laws, and the legitimacy of children” and to define the

participants' specific rights and roles within the larger society. It usually defines the mutual duties of husband and wife and often the duties of their respective families toward each other, and it makes those duties enforceable. (32)

When the middle-class began to develop in the 19th century, attention shifted to romance and individual fulfillment, and while this redefinition was intended to make the duty of the marital rite more palatable to the participants, it had an unintended consequence of prioritizing individual choice and desires.² Consequently, Coontz contends, the 1950s

marriage was less a period of idealistic domination and rather a flawed reaction to a continuing unsettling of what was once a more overtly communal tradition.

These historians reveal a complexity within the seemingly stagnant and oppressive nature of the Eisenhower-era marriage: whatever the inequalities and abuses such a relationship entails, most Americans entered into it freely. Though many recognized the limits they were putting on their freedom, they accepted these burdens as means to another end, one that could not be reached without the aid of the marital partner. This paradox is nothing new, and in fact recalls the social contract theories discussed in earlier chapters, as best articulated by Rousseau – when fully formed and autonomous individuals wish for an end they cannot accomplish themselves, they form communities, thereby giving up some rights for the purpose of achieving a particular goal. The postwar middle-class young adults wanted stability and security in a dangerous time and therefore alienated their autonomy to establish it. But as so often happens, the contract becomes a contradiction, in which individuals perform their freedom by foregoing it.

Like the agreements discussed in the previous chapters, the contract marriage assumes that individuals are self-interested agents, fully conscious of the arrangements into which they enter. As the ur-relationship in most Western societies, marriage has received attention from most liberal social contract thinkers; however, where the agreements that govern property laws or the formation of civilizations have fairly narrow aims – society must be established to give security, property must be protected to honor an individual's labor, etc. – philosophers have struggled to articulate the role of marriage. Most notably, both Kant and Hegel, who come to radically different conclusions about

the role of property, describe childbirth as the end of marriage, and therefore frame the pact as a supernatural bond that supersedes individual desires.³ The inescapable social imperative implicit in this contract has, as Foucault puts it, made the marriage the most public of private societies: it receives “the most intense focus of constraints; it was spoken of more than anything else; more than any other relation, it was required to give a detailed accounting of itself” (37). But for many feminist thinkers, the public nature of the marital contract undermines the possibilities of autonomy that Weiss and Coontz found. The root of the problem, Carole Pateman argues, is that the social contract assumes, and thereby covers over, a sexual contract, which insists that women remain enclosed in the home and servile under the male head:⁴

Sexual difference is political difference; sexual difference is the difference between freedom and subjection. Women are not party to the original contract through which men transform their natural freedom into the security of civil freedom. Women are the subject of the contract. The (sexual) contract is the vehicle through which men transform their natural right over women into the security of civil patriarchal right. (6)

Pateman’s position echoes the genealogy of femininity that Simone de Beauvoir outlines in *The Second Sex*. Where marriage pretends to be “a union freely entered upon by the consent of two independent persons,” it remains “a very different thing for man and for woman,” as the latter are barred from “making exchanges and contracts with the male caste upon a footing of equality” (425 - 426). The asymmetry between genders undermines the basic premises of the marital and social contracts, and thereby corrupts the community hoped to be formed by the central couple. They become a society in which the members “have lost their independence without escaping loneliness; they are

statically united, they are the ‘one,’ instead of maintaining a dynamic and living relation;” as a result, the free autonomy espoused by contract theorists falls short, because the members “can give each other nothing, exchange nothing, whether in the realm of ideas or on the erotic plane. A thousand evenings of vague small talk, blank silences, yawning over the newspaper, retiring at bedtime!” (471).

It is no surprise that Beauvoir’s argument resounded so strongly in the suburbs, particularly when articulated in Betty Friedan’s 1963 bestseller *The Feminine Mystique*. After all, as part of the U.S. government’s attempts to continue WWII levels of patriotism against the oncoming Soviet threat, the suburb was specifically designed for nuclear families governed by these contracts. As May, Weiss, and other historians observe, a number of Federal mandates encouraged the space’s continued growth and its imagery became a powerful rhetorical tool: when then-Vice President Nixon used suburbia as an example of the superiority of American capitalism over the socialism of Khrushchev’s Soviet Union, he directly pointed to its advantages for women and families. For Nixon, and any number of American leaders after him, suburbia was built for the family home where “a man could display his success through the accumulation of consumer goods. Women, in turn, would reap rewards for domesticity by surrounding themselves with commodities” (May 164). Early pioneer of planned communities James Rouse articulated the connection in an interview with *Life Magazine*, explaining that urbanists have dealt with “highways, land uses, densities – even with crime, delinquency and disease, but it almost never begins with the simple question: ‘How can we best provide for the happiness of a man, his wife, and family?’” (qtd. in Bloom 33). Scores of

developers and real estate agents have followed Rouse's lead, making the suburbs the prime space to enact the conjugal contract, thereby forever linking suburbia and the 1950s marriage in the American imagination.

A Different Type of Woman: Contract and Expectation in Tom Perrotta's *Little Children*

The failure of the liberal marriage contract identified by Beauvoir and Pateman presents a conflict explored by a myriad of fiction writers, and critics have long associated the development of the novel with the advent of the modern companionate marriage.⁵ Where the political unions suited early modern dramatists and courtly love was the subject for – and an invention of – the romantic poets,⁶ the novel's multivocal form effectively captured the tension between the earlier, more communal model of marriage and the changes wrought by post-Enlightenment individualism. According to Tony Tanner, because marriage is, for bourgeois society, “the all-subsuming, all-organizing, all-containing contract,” the bourgeois novelist “has no choice but to engage the subject of marriage in one way or another, at no matter what extreme of celebration or contestation,” and will ultimately discover “that the bourgeois novel is coeval and coterminous with the power concentrated in the central structure of marriage” (15).

But while Leslie Fiedler agrees that love – “or more precisely, marriage and seduction” – is the “subject par excellence of the novel,” he identifies a revulsion towards such couplings in its American version. Fiedler argues that American novelists, under influence of Puritan forbearers, have collapsed these impulses and thereby associate love in general, and women in particular, with death and damnation. As a result, the terror

implicit in death and love is rarely directly addressed by American novelists, but is often sublimated into humor; American literature, then, resembles “a chamber of horrors disguised as an amusement park ‘fun house,’ where we pay to play at terror and are confronted in the innermost chamber with a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face” (27). Therefore, the great American novels tend to be boy’s stories – “books that turn from society to nature or nightmare out of a desperate need to avoid the facts of wooing, marriage, and child-bearing” (25). For Fiedler, Rip Van Winkle represents the paradigmatic figure, who memorializes “however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town toward the good companions and the magic keg of Holland’s gin,” the first of many who run from civilization, “which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall, to sex, marriage, and responsibility” (26). Judith Fetterly considers Irving’s story far less playful, identifying it as “one of the first American books in which man, nature, and beast ... are sacrosanctly linked and woman is seen as the agent of civilization that seeks to repress this holy trinity” (5). Conversely, Rip, who sleeps long enough to evade his wife and her nagging, rejoins society as a philosopher king and a hero who successfully defeated “civilization and the imperatives of adulthood” (6). Fiedler and Fetterly’s approaches have been troubled in the following decades by the recovery of domestic fiction performed by critics who restage the marriage plot as a form of female agency and influence on the political, as discussed in the previous chapter, but the central tension remains cogent: American writers often frame the “responsibility” inherent to marriage as something limiting, something to be feared and avoided.

Given the aforementioned connection between suburbia and the 1950s marriage – and, of course, the importance of contractual thought to the framers of the modern suburb – it is not surprising that some of the most compelling explorations occur in suburban fiction. In fact, nearly every suburban fiction focuses on married characters, making the marriage pact an important element, if not the exact focal point of these stories.⁷ Some, such as Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* or Cheever’s *Bullet Park* portray the relationship as an intimate respite from the demanding outside world, while others deconstruct the restrictive nature of contracts and gender role, portraying it as a vice trapping both men and women. Outside of some more pointed portrayals, most depictions contain both elements, longing for the companionship and support marriage promises while simultaneously begrudging the restrictions imposed by long-term obligations. Like the stories in chapters one and two, these fictions problematize the rigidity of contractual model and seek an association based on obligation and interaction, in which the members exhibit a care for one another that exceeds the limits of contract.

Tom Perrotta, a satirist in the vein of T. C. Boyle or Tom Robbins, addresses the oddities of these contracts in his 2004 novel *Little Children*. Ostensibly the story of an extra-marital affair between feminist-turned-housewife Sarah and handsome stay-at-home dad Todd, *Little Children* is more interested in marriage than in cheating. The main characters commit adultery not for the thrill of transgression, but for the chance to reset their marriages and to form a couple that maintains the static roles promised in their vows. In the same way Updike’s *Marry Me: A Romance* is a story about adultery wrapped around a marriage plot, then, Perrotta embeds a marriage plot within an adultery

narrative. The shift allows Perrotta to widen his critical aim, mocking not only the absurdities of the middle-aged adulterers, but also the conjugal contract's attempts to lock infinite individuals into predetermined and unchanging identities.

A brief scene focused on Sarah's husband Richard Pierce best captures the novel's approach to marriage, in which he meditates on the subject while looking at internet pornography in his home office. As he ogles the digital images, Richard reflects on his hasty engagement to first wife Peggy and his deteriorating relationship to Sarah, describing marriage in terms that recall other literary husbands such as Frank Wheeler and Harry Angstrom. Richard considers himself constrained by his marriage and resents his wives for shackling him with "the burden of parenthood" and "imprisoning him in a suburban cage," sensing the end of his second marriage when he feels "a familiar sense of claustrophobia and resentment, as if he were once again a young man throwing away the best years of his youth" (117, 120). The fact that Richard frames his marriages as "wrong from the start" implies the presence of a "right" marriage, or perhaps more accurately, a "true self" that is being violated by his marriages. In fact, the accounts he gives of both of his marriages – the "silence and passivity" into which he, prompted by an unwanted surprise pregnancy, married Peggy or how he "completely ... misread his own needs" when throwing himself into his union with Sarah – rely on a logic of authenticity that, despite the agreements into which he entered, was violated by the coupling (116, 121). When he dismisses his newfound pornographic desires with maxims – "if there was one thing life had taught him, it was that it was ridiculous to be at war with your own desires" or "*we want what we want ... and there's not much we can do about it*" – he calls on the

language of authenticity, framing his connubial life as an offense to the contract he hoped to put forth (109, 111).

This language of authenticity becomes Perrotta's satirical target, as he describes the cheap, tawdry means by which Richard asserts his selfhood: his "night school MBA," coining trademarks for fast food products "The Cheese-Bomb Mini-Pizza™" and "The Double-Wide Burger™," and embarking on "a string of hotel flings, as well as a long-term affair with a client's receptionist," or trying to convince Sarah to join swingers' "house parties" (117, 121). More ironically, Richard finds his paragon of the authentic in the persona of "Slutty Kay," a middle-aged model who specializes in housewife-themed pornography: where he considers most pornography patently unreal – "greedy male businessmen speaking through the mouths of young women with big fake tits" – he is convinced by her combination of the "brazen (calling herself 'slutty') and the banal ('actively pursuing a swinging lifestyle'; 'my God-given sexuality')" (114). Richard is struck by Kay's "moral and intellectual clarity," and sees a "niceness [that] radiated from her face," so innocent and pure in Richard's estimation that her "sweet nature was unmistakable, even when she was performing unspeakable acts with a champagne bottle" (115). This combination foregrounds Richard's primary attraction to Kay, specifically the way she retains a fantastic element of sexuality within the context of an ideal marriage. Accordingly, throughout the scene, in which Richard employs a pair of "used" underwear purchased from Slutty Kay's website as a stimulant, he struggles to draw a distinction between his wife and Kay: "He was a married man, after all. If he wanted to get his hands on a pair of unwashed panties, he didn't have to look any farther than the bathroom

hamper;” “For all he knew, [the thong] could have been worn by any woman in the world, including Sarah” (110, 121). The fantasy requires him to believe that Kay is “a different sort of woman” from his wives, thereby framing the unhappiness in his marriages to a type of authenticity, which reduces all to full real types, not people performing actions (110).

Perrotta complicates Richard’s glee by repeatedly drawing attention to the ridiculous, contradictory nature of his obsession. The narrator punctuates the scene with asides that undercut any clear sense of unified selfhood, noting that part of Richard was both a “responsible adult who disapproved on moral grounds and understood quite clearly that the porn industry exploited and violated young women” and “a horny teenager who just thought it was incredibly cool to see pictures of naked ladies doing crazy stuff,” or accentuating the “uncomfortable fact that [Kay] existed for him solely as a digital image” (113, 116). Even while trying to become aroused by the underwear – which he purchased to “provide a connection to the actual woman and her actual body, liberating him from the sanitized stillness of a photograph” – Richard must ignore the possibility that the “real” underwear was, in fact, subcontracted out to “a sweatshop full of bored women – Chinese and Latina seamstresses – all of them wearing polka-dotted thongs as they worked their sewing machines” by repeating to himself “*These are Kay’s panties ... These panties belong to Kay*” (116, 122). This comically shocking juxtaposition renders Richard’s notions of authenticity utterly risible, a predetermined agreement that has little to do with the present and factual in front of him. As a result, marriage, in Richard’s

mind, becomes little more than a series of fantastic agreements, barely related to facts of the other's existence and able to be abandoned when they fail to serve the self.

Though a relatively minor and fully unsympathetic character – even Todd's demanding wife Kathy gets a full arc and reader empathy – Richard's theory of marriage reverberates throughout the novel, giving insight to the central affair plot. Kathy secretly resents Todd for his inability to pass the bar exam and become a lawyer because she “wanted to have it both ways—wanted to live the interesting life of an artist without accepting the unpleasant financial sacrifices that usually came along with the package,” while Todd senses this resentment and wishes she would allow him to be a househusband (161). For her part, Sarah wants to continue enjoying the fruits of Richard's economic success while also having him home to watch their daughter Lucy as she pursues her neglected academic and artistic interests. Each of the characters, then, applies a contractual approach to their relationships, not unlike those that motivated the 1950s marriage. If Kathy and Sarah want to be the artists or scholars they think they should be, they need their husbands to be economically prosperous; conversely, if Todd and Richard want to be the successful people they consider themselves to be – Todd a football star, Richard a marketing genius – then they need specific, often sexual, responses from their wives. Despite Richard's professed progressiveness, Sarah's feminist studies, Todd's interest in non-traditional gender roles, or Kathy's successful career making popular television documentaries, the couples invoke the promises of the 1950s marriage: they expect the husbands to be the primary breadwinners while the wives provide support and

tend to domestic duties. The failure to embody the terms of the contract motivates the story's adultery plot.

And yet, in the same way Richard's scene foregrounds the problems with the problems with the novel's approach to marriage, it also sets up the story's resolution and gestures toward an alternative to this exploitative, contractual logic. Midway through the scene, a bit of free indirect discourse reveals that Richard wishes to hurry through his act "so he could get back downstairs to his real life, where his wife and daughter were waiting for him, their impatience increasing by the minute" (75). More than a simple spatial designation, the narration draws a distinction between Richard's isolated world of fantasy and unmitigated desire and the "real life" where his wife waits for him to watch their daughter so that she can go on a walk with a friend. These walks had become "the highlight of Sarah's day ... the one thing she looked forward to all day," and required Richard's participation – watching their daughter Lucy – to achieve (75,78). Sarah's presence on the periphery of Richard's fantasy is a demand for hospitality, a face-to-face interruption – quite literally, as she does eventually barge in on Richard and catch him in the act – that renders his strict demarcations ridiculous and irresponsible.

Richard is far from the only character to evade this responsibility, and in fact nearly every character does the same, including Sarah, a point Perrotta makes at the end of the novel. Like Richard, Sarah intends to escape their neighborhood and forge the perfect connubial life in a different subdivision, but the plan fails when Todd, in an ill-timed moment of bravado, injures himself while trying a skateboard stunt. As Sarah waits for him at the rendezvous point, Perrotta offers a different vision of suburbia, one

that contradicts the unreal space imagined by the characters. The park where Sarah and Todd planned to meet serves as a connective point for the dénouement of the novel's primary and sub plots, bringing Sarah and Lucy, as well as strictly conservative Mary Ann, to the same deserted playground where disgraced vigilante cop Larry Moon confronts child molester Ronnie McGorvery. Realizing that, in her distress over Todd, Sarah has lost track of Lucy and left her at the swingset where Ronnie now approaches, Sarah finally recognizes the importance of her decisions. Her agreement with Todd was not just childish playacting – it was a distraction from the very real presence of danger. Like Frank Bascombe before her, the recognition of potential death of her child forces Sarah to face the facticity of her actual life and her responsibility to those in proximity. Although it was an illusion that brought her to the park – “She was here because he said he'd run away with her, and she believed him—believed, for a few brief, intensely sweet moments, that she was something special, one of the lucky ones, a character in a love story with a happy ending” – she finds herself with a bizarre mix of people, including her vulnerable daughter, her ideological enemy Mary Ann, her worst nightmare Ronnie, and Larry, a total stranger in need. The spatial arrangement Perrotta uses for this closing scene posits strict marriage contracts as something egoistic and unreal, but also posits the suburb as a place of engagement instead of containment. These contracts become an means by which individuals distract themselves from those in proximity, whether they be the spouse who exceeds expectation or the neighbor who poses a threat. The marriage contract in *Little Children* is, then, ultimately foolish and irresponsible – the fantastical dreams of bored housewives and hormonal husbands – not the clear stabilizing force

sought after by the young couples of the 1950s. But at the same time, the novel posits the suburbs as a space of engagement that offers a chance to take responsibility for others in a way often precluded by notions of the “traditional marriage.”

Bending the Bonds: Egoism and Adultery in *The Ice Storm*

Perrotta’s story of people seeking a better marriage via infidelity deviates from most affair plots, which usually frame adultery as an act of freedom, an affront to the constriction of the conjugal contract and not an attempt to reform it. This shift is especially true of suburban fictions like Gary Ross’s 1999 film *Pleasantville*, a fantasy in which a magic remote control transports two teenagers (Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon) from their dysfunctional home to the world of a *Donna Reed Show* / *Leave it to Beaver* style sitcom. Though this literally black and white life seems perfect – the houses are all clean, the wives all well-kempt, the husbands all successful and happy with their jobs – the teenager’s presence exposes the locals to possibilities unknown to their simple idyll, and they begin to transgress social norms and express their individuality. In the film’s most striking cinematic device, characters who resist conformity explode from black and white to color, leading to a conflict between those threatened by the changes – mostly the men of the town – and the idiosyncratic “coloreds.” Ross locates this struggle in the self-actualization narrative of Mrs. Parker (Joan Allen) who, as she grows sexually curious and dissatisfied with her marriage, shifts her attention to local soda-jerk turned fine artist, Bill Johnson (Jeff Daniels). At the film’s climax, Maguire’s character tries to make the men of the town accept the necessity of complex pluralities by forcing them to

confess their feelings toward the changes. He focuses on Mr. Parker (William H. Macy), prodding him until he finally admits the anger and sadness caused by his wife's affair, a depth of feeling great enough to make him become colored as well. The film posits the liberal, full color world as more realistic and complicated than its monochromatic counterpart, but the final scene, in which the Parkers sit at a bus stop and discuss their lives, subverts this complexity. When forced to address the difficulties of their new desires, the same Parkers who, one scene earlier, acknowledged the messy emotional fallout from their shifting relationship simply laugh about the future, as if these changes were just another odd occurrence.

Pleasantville's inconsistent tone is common among extra-marital affair stories, which often validate the adulterer's achievement of selfhood by portraying the illicit couple as a brave and daring pair, defying society for the sake of a truer love; subsequently, authors try to shift audience sympathy toward the lovers by making the abandoned spouses into Dame Van Winkle-like shrews or Chillingsworth-like lechers. In his monumental *Adultery in the Novel*, Tony Tanner associates these overbearing spouses with the demands of the contract marriage, arguing that their very constriction justifies evasion through adultery: "contracts *create* transgressions; the two are inseparable, and the one would have no meaning without the other" (11). By asserting a self outside of the marital bonds, Tanner explains, the adulterer frees him or herself from the demands of society; if, as demonstrated in classical comedic drama, a wedding represents the establishment of order, then the adultery novel "can be seen as an attempt to establish an extra-contractual contract, or indeed an anti-contract that that precisely threatens those

continuations, distinctions, and securities” outlined by social contract theorists (6). In establishing such an anti-social (or perhaps extra-social) identity, the adulterer “introduces an agonizing and irresolvable category-confusion into the individual and thence into society itself ... Adulteration implies pollution, contamination, a ‘base admixture,’ a wrong combination.” According to Tanner, if “society depends for its existence on certain rules governing what may be combined and what should be kept separate, then adultery, by bringing the wrong things together in the wrong places (or the wrong people in the wrong beds), offers an attack on those rules, revealing them to be arbitrary rather than absolute” (12-13).

Philosopher Denis de Rougemont contends that this romantic struggle of an individual against social obstacles, exemplified in the Tristan and Isolde myth, has made adultery plots attractive to novelists. In fact, Rougemont writes in *Love in the Western World*, “to judge by literature, adultery would seem to be one of the most remarkable of occupations in both Europe and America” (16). While this claim might be true of the European fictions Rougemont examines, Fiedler finds it less applicable to American literature, whose authors’ ambivalence – if not outright disgust – toward coupling alters the traditional affair plot. For Feidler and Judith Armstrong, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* serves as the paradigmatic American adultery story, translating the narrative from that of a passionate couple eschewing social norms to an internal battle between the various natures of a single self. Though Feidler and Armstrong find the novel’s conclusion ultimately unsatisfying – arguing that Hawthorne’s attempts to “examine what he could resurrect from the New England subconscious and the overt heritage of the

Puritan repression of passion” are ultimately mitigated by an ending that sees Dimmesdale dying, Hester transfigured into an angel, and the wild and pagan Pearl inducted back into the social order via marriage, a resolution that avoids the “real issue of the role of passion and adultery in civilized society” (Armstrong 104) – they rightly identify a change in focus in the American adultery novel. In particular, *The Scarlet Letter* makes the act of adultery not contrary to social contracts but rather, to use Tanner’s phrase, the means of establishing “an extra-contractual contract.” By locating the struggle between passion and obstacle within a single person, Hawthorne makes the American adultery plot into the struggle to assert one’s ego. Dimmesdale’s victory over Chillingworth comes when he rejects the expectations of his parishioners and accepts his relationship with Hester and Pearl, knowing that this decision will force him to flee his village. Hester and Pearl are not, then, the people to whom Dimmesdale responds and for whom he takes responsibility; they are simply the means by which he asserts an identity otherwise than the kindly pastor the villagers expect. Hawthorne can remain ambiguous regarding the meaning of bright red “A” that supernaturally appears in the sky at his moment of resolve – it can signify “Angel” or “Adulterer” – because, as far as the narrative is concerned, it means neither. It exists as an impetus to direct Dimmesdale toward this new persona, for which Hester is simply a tool.

The affair’s establishment of an “extra-contractual contract” appears in a number of suburban fictions, beginning with the pre-war proto-suburban novels: Tom Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* uses Myrtle Wilson to reassert his control over lower classes, George Babbitt gains purpose through his affair with Tanis Judeque, and the *femmes*

fatale of James M. Cain's gritty noir novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* seduce gullible men to free themselves from their boorish husbands. *Revolutionary Road*'s Frank Wheeler calls his affair with coworker Maureen Grube "the standard daydream of the married man" (250); John Irving's T. S. Garp and the central couples of Andre Dubus's short story "Adultery" escape from the monotony of marriage by cycling through a variety of sexual partners; Realtor Joe Stratford becomes the other man of a family friend in a mid-life crisis in Jane Smiley's *Good Faith*; Indian immigrant Dev from Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Sexy" enjoys a multicultural experience with American Miranda; Don Draper of the television series *Mad Men* forms new relationships with different women to continue his project of self-definition.⁸ Among the writers of suburban fictions, the clearest successor to Hawthorne's adultery plots is John Updike, who *Time Magazine* deemed the chronicler of "the adulterous society."⁹ In addition to incorporating affair plots into most of his suburban novels – the *Rabbit* tetralogy, *Marry Me*, *Couples*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *The Widows of Eastwick*, and *Villages*, among a number of short stories – Updike has written direct variations of *The Scarlet Letter* three times: *A Month of Sundays*, *Roger's Version*, and *S.* Donald J. Grenier sees a similarity between Updike and Hawthorne's religious, "Puritan-haunted" worldview, for whom "adultery is a bridge between the garden and the world" and marital transgression "represents the snake itself as it sneaks into Hawthorne's forest, [Henry] James's drawing room, and Updike's suburb." While Updike's characters might "fear for the loss of their souls and the breakup of their social identities when they hop from bed to bed," Grenier observes, "they worry most of all about themselves" (23-24).

So when Piet Hanema of *Couples* praises adultery as a form of exploration – “a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge” – he must immediately answer his lover’s reminder, “We know God is not mocked” (342). As it was for Hawthorne, it is for Updike and many of his fellow writers of suburban fiction: though adultery requires at least one other person, it is ultimately a battle between the adulterer and his conscience, in which the beloved is just a means to that end.

For Tanner, novels like *Couples* are “as little about passion as [they are] about marriage,” resulting in a sexual explicitness that is “merely formal and technical.” This lack of passion stems from society’s ambivalence toward “marriage, and all that is implied in that transaction,” which undermines the power of the contracts the process institutes (89). Conversely, some postmodern philosophers have posited open sexuality as an antidote to traditional, logocentric models of community, exemplified by the institution of marriage.¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the nuclear family as an abusive psychoanalytical tool used to lock the multitudinous schizo – their term for the multifaceted and fully-potentialized individual – into an Oedipal triangle consisting of “mommy/daddy/me.” Against these familial restrictions, they condone free love between serial partners, as modeled by the wasp’s process of pollination. As opposed to the static, “arboreal” nature of the nuclear family, free love preserves potentiality through pure desire, initiating a non-hierarchical, rhizomic network:

Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only on the level of the strata—a parallelism between two strata such that a plant organization on one imitates an animal organization on the other. At the same time, something else entirely is

going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp. Each of these becomings brings about the deterritorialization of one term and the reterritorialization of the other; the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 10)

More recently, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have invoked this image when combatting the reductive nature of the nuclear family. Love, for Hardt and Negri, can be “productive of being [or] of the common,” provided that it is shielded from the corruption invited by capitalism (*Commonwealth* 180-181). Where the nuclear family undermines the constitutive power of love – “Marriage and family close the couple in a unit that subsequently ... corrupts the common” – the wasp and orchid model produces singularities: “Wasps and orchids do not suggest any morality tale of marriage and stable union, as bees and flowers do, but rather evoke scenarios of cruising and serial sex common to some gay male communities, especially before the onslaught of the AIDS pandemic;” these images “provide an antidote to the corruptions of love in the couple and the family, opening love up to the encounter of singularities” (183, 187). As indicated by these approaches, Deleuze/Guattari and Hardt/Negri imagine serial sex as a way to enact one’s potentiality without being locked in the centrifugal confines of monogamy. To put it in literary terms, if the marriage plot narrates the establishment of contract, of the arboreal, then the adultery plot imagines the possibility of the rhizomic.

The adults in Rick Moody’s 1994 novel *The Ice Storm* pursue exactly this philosophy of freedom and singularity by embarking on that most mythical of suburban

bacchanals – the key party. The morning after a party is disrupted by the titular storm, participant Jim Williams tries to rationalize his behavior by invoking language similar to that of Hardt/Negri or Deleuze/Guattari. When marriage grows “familiar” and starts “to age a little bit,” Williams explains, the contract gets smaller and the spouses begin to resent one another. But where the previous generation insisted on inflexible adherence to their vows, modern “liberated” suburbanites like the Williamses or the Hoods enact the Deleuzian free love ethos: “We can bend these bonds a little bit...Without endangering our families or anything. Borrow out of affection, right? Not callously, but the way you call on a friend to share something” (243-245). But while Jim’s speech echoes the sentiments of many other literary philanderers, Moody’s composition of the scene undoes Williams’s high-minded rhetoric, as he directs this explanation to his 11-year-old son Sandy, who he and his next-door-neighbor/one-night-stand partner Elena Hood found naked and in bed with her 14-year-old daughter Wendy. Moody compares the rationalizations of Jim and Elena to Sandy and Wendy’s sexual exploration, depicting the latter as something confusing and difficult, a pathetic attempt to establish relational stability while their parents drift from bed to bed. This portrayal sets *The Ice Storm* apart from many other adultery plots, emphasizing the obligations and ethical fallout that stories like *Pleasantville* ignore, while still addressing the “extra-contractual contract” found in so many other stories. Moody employs a narrative trick – most of the novel appears to be told in omniscient, third-person voice, until the narrator reveals himself to be the principle couple’s son Paul Hood – to refigure the adultery plot from the struggle

of a single person within society to an emphasis on an individual's obligations to one's spouse, children, and neighbors.

Nowhere is this redefinition more clear than a surprising intertextual moment that occurs late in the novel, in which the Hoods reconvene after the titular storm and see a "flaming figure four" in the sky:

And right then there was a sign in the sky. An actual sign in the sky. The conversation stopped and there was a sign in the sky and it knotted together everything in that twenty-four hours. Above the parking lot. A flaming figure four. And it wasn't only above the parking lot. They saw it all over the country, over the Unitarian Church of Stamford, over New Canaan High School, over the Port Chester train station and up and down the New Haven line, over emergency vehicles in Greenwich and Norwalk, over the little office where Wesley Myers was trying to write the next day's sermon, for the first Sunday in Advent. In halls devoted to public service, in private mansions and dilapidated apartments. The heavens declared: the flaming figure four. (278-279)

The imagery here directly recalls a climactic scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, when an "immense letter" appeared in the sky, emboldening Dimmesdale to confess his relationship with Hester and Pearl, thereby rejecting his parishioners' hold on him (122). Hawthorne's narration emphasizes the social nature of the sign's appearance – other townspeople see it as well, and "interpret it to stand for Angel" because "our good Governor Winthrop was made an angel this past night" – but the narrator describes it as "a revelation, addressed to himself alone," thereby framing the miracle as an assertion of the individualism common to American Romanticism (124, 122). The "flaming figure four" of *The Ice Storm* serves a similarly communal purpose, as its presence ties together all of the people of the Hoods' suburb, but it does so in a uniquely different manner than

it did for Hawthorne, not enforcing divisions but “knott[ing] together everything in that twenty-four hours,” namely the key party attendees.

Heretofore, notions of obligation were secondary for these neighbors, a point demonstrated by Jim Williams’s claim that they could “bend the bonds” of marriage in pursuit of personal happiness, but the figure four reinforces Benjamin’s renewed commitment to his family and to his neighbors. The phantasmal symbol appears just as Benjamin prepares to tell Paul that his teenage neighbor Mike Williams had died in the storm, electrocuted by a downed power line. The narrating Paul connects Benjamin’s revelation to his encounter with Mike’s corpse, and the way the experience shocks him into Heideggarian “being-toward-death:” upon finding Mike’s body, Benjamin is struck first by overwhelming guilt – “of weakening and diluting what bonds of family remained in his family” – and with identification: “Suddenly it seemed, truly suddenly, that this body, this abbreviated life, this disaster was *his*” (216, 219). The guilt then takes the form of responsibility, beginning with care for those in proximity – “This boy is my neighbors’ son,” Benjamin tells a paramedic, trying to enlist his help, “This boy right here.” – and then a relation to his wife:

We took these vows, remember? I want to talk about that now. We said these words, you said them, too, and I’m trying to stick by them ... I’m trying to restore them is what I mean. (228, 265)

Benjamin’s language here directly repudiates the notions of self-interest traditionally associated with extra-marital affairs, in which the lover asserts an identity by moving outside the marriage pact. The object of love in Rougemont becomes a Levinasian other,

disrupting the self-interested Same into responsibility through the presence of unthematizable death. In the same way that the flaming figure four stopped conversation and forced everyone to freeze and recognize their relationship to one another, the death of Mike Williams shatters selfishness of adultery and forces Benjamin to respond to those in proximity.

The narrating Paul contrasts the newly-responsible Benjamin to the pathetically amorous Benjamin he portrays at the start of the story. Through Paul's narration, Benjamin describes his mistress, next-door-neighbor Janey Williams, in the language of romantic individualism, claiming that "Janey wanted him as he was!" and likening his affair to the experience of an "agnostic discovering the consolations of religion; Paul's narration sarcastically invokes Platonic love by insisting that, Benjamin's "desire had grown subtle and strange," no longer interested in "large breasts in Cross Your Heart brassieres," but rather in "hunting for comfort" (7). Ultimately, Paul lumps Benjamin's philandering into an indistinct pile of clichés drawn from numerous affair stories, thereby revealing their potentiality of anything to be an actuality of nothing:

Maybe he fucked against the notion of the family, to escape its constraints. Maybe he adulterated because of his keen appreciation of beauty. Maybe he celebrated the freedom of the new sexuality. Maybe he did it to abase himself. Maybe he did it to hurt Janey Williams, or to injure her husband – they were more attractive than he was, they were more at ease. Maybe it was her husband he wanted to fuck, and it was such a terrible, dark secret that it was secret even from Benjamin. Maybe he wanted to get caught. Maybe he did it to escape, from his job, his anxieties, his psychosomatic complaints. Maybe he did it because his parents, too, had done it (or so he supposed) and the desire to cheat boiled in his genes. Maybe, at last, he did it simply because he wanted what he couldn't have. (21)

Unlike the unrestrained Byronic hero asserted by Deleuze and Guattari, Paul's version of his father is helplessly driven by his libido, fitfully trying to give it meaning even while looking forward to his next escapade.

Paul's dismissal of his father's extramarital adventures may seem, on the surface, to be little more than Oedipal angst, but Paul's revelation at the end of the novel reframes the entire story as a reaction to his father's behavior. Moody foregrounds this personal aspect through the use of imagery drawn from superhero comics, with which Paul was obsessed, climaxing with the appearance of the Fantastic Four logo in the sky. In the narration just before the appearance of the figure, Paul provides an alliterative list of words to sum up the preceding chapters – "Fucking Family. Feeble and forlorn and floundering and foolish and frustrating and functional and sad, sad. Fucking family" – and the repetition of "f" words in relation to family draws attention to the contrast between the fictional Fantastic Four – the "first family" of the Marvel Comics universe, a team of superheroes comprised of husband and wife Reed and Sue Richards, their son Franklin, younger brother Johnny Storm, and family friend Ben "The Thing" Grimm – and the troubled Hoods (274). Comic books serve as a type of founding myth for Paul, indicating the way family "should" be, and he constantly compares and contrasts his family and those in the comics, particularly Benjamin; his father's name, his rough and psoriasis-plagued skin, and his dour disposition reminds Paul of the rocky hero, The Thing. More pertinently, the contrast serves to illustrate the Hood's own failures, as even the spectacular challenges that befall the superheroes are not enough to tear the Richards

apart; “Comic books never ended,” Paul complains, but his own parents are ending their own marriage after years of perusing their own desires (276).

As he reveals himself, Paul describes that period of his adolescence as one in which “comic books were indistinguishable from the truth” and “the beginning of my confessions.” The conflation between comic books and confessions underscores Paul’s tenuous grasp on reality and, therefore, his unreliability as a narrator; indeed, the qualifier he provides – “Or that’s how I remember it, anyway” – foregrounding the egocentric, tentative nature of his story (279). However, the fact that this admission is paired with the shift from omniscient to first person narration reminds readers the degree to which Benjamin’s actions have irreparably affected Paul’s subjectivity, thereby undermining the language of freedom and irresponsibility he espouses throughout the story. The flaming figure four, then, more than a “real” event, is a very much a figure, a reminder of the family’s dependence on one another and a repudiation of the egoism of adultery that his parents have pursued. Against Deleuzian notions of orchids and wasps, the story reasserts a Levinasian sense of responsibility. Paul’s admission reveals the entire novel as a repudiation of the egoism and rationalizations asserted by Benjamin and his fellow swingers, that they may wish to “bend the bonds,” to construct a selfhood according to their own desires, there are always others who are affected and implicated in the actions of others. Paul’s closing bitterness serves as a demand for hospitality that criticizes extra-contractual adultery and calls for another, more ethical form of association.

A Cradle of Misinformation: Marriage and Obligation in DeLillo's *White Noise*

So what then do spouses owe one another? How can one both avoid the limitations of marriage contracts that Perrotta satirizes without retreating to the unethical egoism that Moody critiques? I find a sort of middle way in Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*: the story of the Gladneys, a family whose techniques for ignoring death are disrupted when a chemical spill sends an airborne toxic event into their suburban neighborhood. The characters employ a number of evasion strategies, from religious dogmas to consumer goods to experimental drugs, but narrator Jack Gladney locates the purest form of assurance in the body of his wife Babette. Jack and Babette profess a literally unbelievable love for one another, at times recalling the silly repartee of love-struck teenagers – when Babette claims “I want to make you happy,” Jack insists, “I’m happy when I’m pleasing you” – and other times, their dependence is more troubling, as with their recurring debates over who should die first (28). Their husband/wife relationship drifts into that of a mother and child, with Jack finding comfort by nuzzling his head between her breasts – “Her body became the agency of my resolve, my silence ... I drew courage from her breasts, her warm mouth, her browsing hands, from the skimming tips of her fingers on my back” (172)¹¹ – and they become amorous even in public spaces, transfiguring a mundane trip to the grocery store into an erotic tryst.

The Gladney's devotion is, of course, absurd and unreal. It is a fiction, but not unique: nearly every character in *White Noise* relies on some type of myth to distract them from the possibility of death.¹² In the same way “the ‘white noise’ of consumer culture is saying something far more compelling than that our minds have been colonized

by the static of late capitalism,” I argue that the Gladneys’ union is not a simple lie to distract them from the reality of death, but a Heideggerian response to it (Bonca 27). So where Jack might call the family “the cradle of the world’s misinformation,” the novel suggests that the falseness of marriage stems from “something even deeper, like the need to survive.” Accordingly, I read the observation made by the novel’s gonzo voice of reason – “ignorance and confusion [are] the driving forces behind family solidarity” – not a “heartless theory,” but rather an optimistic theory that recalls Jean-Luc Nancy’s contention that “I love you” is a promise both to the real person in proximity and to the unforeseeable possibilities he or she might pursue (81-82). The fictional family, and the marital pact in particular, though ultimately unreal, provides a schematic of interaction in deadly times, forcing people to recognize their dependence on one another.

The importance of unreality and promise is clearly spelled out by a group of German nuns who appear toward the end of the novel to help Jack convalesce after a fight with his wife’s lover, Mr. Grey. As the nuns tend to his wounds, Jack finds himself charmed by the sisters’ quaint faith; but when inquires further about the Church’s teaching, he is sternly rebuffed with the question, “You would have a head so dumb to believe this?” (318). Instead of the ethereal and sensational dogmas about “angels, [and] saints, all the traditional things” that Jack had expected, the nun offers only pragmatic selflessness: “Our pretense is a dedication ... Someone must appear to believe” (317, 319). Their faux-belief is a fiction into which they willingly enter, aware of both its shortcomings and its importance for other people; “It is for others,” she tells him – “[t]he others who spend their lives believing that we still believe” (319, 318). The performance

then is an act of hospitality, through which they take responsibility for those in proximity, regardless of their own desires. The nun demonstrates this hospitality at the start of the scene, when Jack, attempting to charm the nuns, tries to communicating with them in his rudimentary German. The four of them were “charmingly engaged in a childlike dialogue,” but their speech never transcends “count[ing] to ten together” or doing “colors, items of clothing, parts of the body” (317). The nuns’ participation and apparent enjoyment of the activity – “A smile appeared on her seamed face” – contradicts the pragmatic attitude they demonstrate later, revealing their acquiescence to Jack’s games to be part of their devotion to other people.

Despite their playful indulgence with Jack’s language games, the nuns never diminish their roles, but insist that they have taken “[s]erious vows” and live “a serious life” (319). The invocation of “vows” here and the serious implications they suggest connects the nuns’ behavior to the Gladneys’ suburban marriage, and helps explain the outrageous promises Jack and Babbette make to one another. In the same way the nuns have committed to an unreal performance for the sake of those in their care, the Gladneys’ promises are an aspect of their devotion to one another. So while their family may very much be a “cradle of misinformation,” it is not ignorant or distracting, but focused on the other in immediate proximity: the spouse. The facts that, Murray insists, “threaten our happiness and security” become, for Jack and Babbette, the means for connection and devotion, as demonstrated by their many conversations about who should die first. Although Jack reveals to the reader that, despite telling Babbette the opposite, he actually does not want to die first, that given “a choice between loneliness and death, it

would take me a fraction of a second to decide,” the prospect of loneliness is the prime motivating factor. Babbette makes this point when she contends that Jack’s death “would leave a bigger hole in her life than her death would leave in [his]” (101). This talk of gaps and absences underscores the prominence of presence for the construction of one another’s lives, a point felt more keenly for the Gladney’s because of – not in spite of – their knowledge of death; Jack’s unascribed “prayer” may first demand “Don’t let us die,” but it also cries “Let us both live forever in sickness and health, feeble-minded, doddering, toothless, liver-spotted, dim-sighted, hallucinating” (103). Jack and Babbette do certainly cling to one another to look away from the reality of death, but DeLillo never frames this as an ignorance of or escape from death; the fear of death is “deep and real” for these characters, but they never paralyze them – “We manage to function,” largely because of the relationships to one another. When Jack asks “How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last night, this morning?” he once again acts like, to use the nun’s phrase, a “stupid head,” neglecting his own knowledge of Babbette’s deep fears, and her knowledge of his (103). Like the nun’s performances, the aversion Jack makes is part of his obligation to her, not an enclosing determining factor.

The demands and responses in Jack and Babbette’s dialogue illustrate the dialectic of obligation and ethics that Jean-Luc Nancy outlines in his essay “Shattered Love.” Nancy identifies a “reticence” among philosophers when it comes to the topic of love, which he associates with the overwhelming potentiality of the subject. This potentiality suggests that “all the loves possible are in fact the possibilities of love ... impossible to confuse and yet ineluctably entangled.” But where his observation that love “in its

singularity, when it is grasped absolutely, is itself perhaps nothing but the indefinite abundance of all possible loves,” might, like Deleuze and Guattari, prioritize pure desire and potential, Nancy also emphasizes the role of promise and obligation (83).¹³ In fact, not only is love the potential for all loves, but it is also not based in the identity of the lover or beloved, who requires a particular set of responses from his or her partner. So while this description of potentiality through desire clearly rejects the stagnant terms of the marital contract, Nancy does not concur with Deleuze/Guattari or Hardt/Negri’s defense of potentiality through pure desire. Potentiality through desire does not create the love that reaffirms the common, Nancy argues, because desire is not love:

Desire lacks its object – which is the subject – and lacks it while appropriating it to itself (or rather, it appropriates it to itself a lacking). Desire – I mean that which philosophy has thought as desire: will, appetite, conatus, libido – is foreign to love because it sublates, be it negatively, the logic of fulfillment. Desire is self extending towards its end – but love does not extend, nor does it extend itself toward an end. If it is extended, is buying upheaval of the other in me. (98)

Love cannot be pure desire because such desire ultimately leads to an egoism that reduces the object of one’s love into exactly that: an object, a thing. In the same way that Levinas insists that enjoyment result in an interruption by the other, Nancy describes love as the upheaval of all terms and objects, the constant disruption of one’s desires and intentions. Love, then, must be both an assertion of obligation and the acceptance of the beloved’s refusal of these terms.

The coexistence of obligation and freedom is, of course, a contradiction; but, for Nancy, the contradiction is an inescapable element of the inexhaustible nature of love:

“This nature is thus neither simple nor contradictory: it is the contradiction of

contradiction and of noncontradiction ...[t]he contradiction of the contradiction and of the noncontradiction organizes love infinitely and in each of its meanings” (87). If love is an unfulfilable faux-dialectic between the obligation imposed by the lover and the beloved’s refusal to be reduced to these terms, then the phrase “I love you” must be more than simply a description of a current state: it must be a promise that “neither prescribes nor performs. It does nothing and thus is always in vain” (100). The promise of love cannot be the terms of a contract because they are inherently limited, but neither can it be the means of self-actualization because that limits the beloved to an event in the self’s process of becoming. The ethical, reticent love that Nancy describes “is the promise and its keeping, the one independent of the other,” that is committed to the inescapable infinity of the other because “one does not know what one says when one says ‘I love you,’ and one does not say anything, but one knows that one says it and that it is law, absolutely: instantly, one is shared and traversed by that which does not fix itself in any subject or in any signification” (100-101). Consequently, love is a law that imposes obligation on the self toward the other to whom one owes the potential through which the self is constructed.¹⁴

Accordingly, DeLillo repeatedly reminds readers that the presence and dependence the Gladneys enjoy comes with obligations. But in the same way the nun’s responsibility to unbelieving others puts restraints on their lives, they are not determining; the nuns’ performances do not exhaust their potentiality, but rather display a critical hospitality that both performs and disrupts the other’s expectations as a form of care and relation. So also do Jack and Babbette allow for difference in their marriage, an

element essential to their composition as a family. Though many times divorced and the veterans of several previous relationships, the Gladneys do not fit the orchid/wasp alternative to contractual marriage. Jack and Babette have formed a patchwork family, pieced together from the elements of these previous relationships; their family tree is a twisted mess of grafted branches, despite the fact that “all the Gladneys ‘interact’ by any standard criteria, extremely well with one another, cooperatively and in concert, with admirable degrees of both mutual insight and self-irony” (Forraro 17-18). And while such anti-arboreal arrangements might recall Deleuze and Guattari, neither Jack nor Babette advocate the pure desire valorized by those thinkers, practicing instead a type of “obligated freedom.” They remain relatively friendly toward one another’s former spouses, treating past relationships not (like Richard, Todd, and Sarah of *Little Children*) as mistakes from which they must repent, but as layers of experience that inform their current selves. The former marriages, and in fact all of their experiences, become the material of their selves; Babette and Jack “tell each other everything” because “marriages accumulate;” they become the material of identity, for which the other partner is a key and inescapable element (30). The logic here contradicts that of the contract or the affair. In the former, partners diminish their potential by embodying – and imposing – predetermined roles; in the latter, the individual lives by his or her desires, regardless of the needs of others. When the Gladneys turn one another’s “lives for each other’s thoughtful regard,” they demonstrate something different, in which the self is a reaction to one’s prior experience, one’s desires, and one’s obligations. This openness does not trivialize the Gladney’s marriage, but gives it substance.

So when Jack discovers that Babette has not only been secretly taking Dylar – an experimental drug designed to remove one’s fear of death – but also procuring it by agreeing to clandestine sexual liaisons with Mr. Grey, he is hurt by both her infidelity and the fact that she has violated the identity she formed with him. But where Benjamin Hood or Sarah Pierce would have deemed this transgression an irreparable breach of contract, Jack instead increases his devotion to Babette. Initially, this devotion appears to be the same unreality and falseness that troubles other marriages, as evident in the scene in which Babette confesses her indiscretions; while she explains what she has done, Jack reiterates his anger and disappointment by defining her: “All this without my knowing. The whole point of Babette is that she speaks to me, she reveals and confides,” he complains – “Is this why I married Babette? So she would conceal the truth from me, conceal objects from me, join in a sexual conspiracy at my expense?” (199). These declarations may seem no different than the static expectations found in the traditional marriage contract or in the egoism of the adulterer, but two important elements differentiate Jack’s demands. First, although Jack does wish to remind Babette of her obligation to him, but this is not simply the irresponsible terms of a contract, formed without relation to the real and infinite person. Rather, it is based on his and Babette’s factual experience, on the fiction of security they constructed together. Babette tries to make the problem solely hers – “Dylar was my mistake. I won’t let you make it yours as well” – but Jack’s insistence reminds her that they both had equal stakes in the relationship they formed (225). Because he was just as much a part of her identity as she was of his, Jack absolutely has the right to make certain demands of Babette, but they

must be responsible demands, based in the facticity of the infinite other in the relationship, and this responsibility is the second difference from the other forms of relation. So when Babette insists on complicating Jack's simple narrative about betrayal and abdication of the family – "This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it" (192) – she calls for a redefinition of her and Jack's marital identities in relation to the current reality of their existence. Her liaisons with Mr. Grey have become one more experience built into their identities and they need to respond to it, not simply demand that Babette be a particular type of person. And, indeed, Jack comes to accept this redefinition, as indicated by the openness of his new promise to Babette: he begins by asserting his embodied presence – "I'm right here" – and then shifts to an open-ended promise made to an unknowable and infinite other: "Whatever you want or need, however difficult, tell me and it's done" (199).

It is no accident that DeLillo chooses to set his story about redefined marriage in the suburbs, as the space's pretensions to security resonate with the other evasion methods practiced by the novel's characters. Indeed, as historians like May and Coontz explained, the traditional marriage formed by wartime anxieties is inextricable from suburbia's remove from pluralist tensions. But where Richard, Todd, and Sarah of *Little Children* believed the myth of this traditional marriage and saw the neighborhood as a suffocating trap when their spouses revealed themselves to be less than ideal, or where Benjamin Hood and his fellow philanderers in *The Ice Storm* used key parties to transform their subdivision into a harem filled with unattached women, Jack and Babette

take their model of responsible engagement back into the neighborhood and apply it to those in proximity. The Gladneys perform a marriage not unlike those desired by Todd and Kathy or the Hoods – to say nothing of the Wheelers, the Bascombes, the Nailles, the Freelings, the Angstroms, the Parkers, the Lamberts, the Drapers, the Garps, or any other fictional suburban couple addressed in this study. Like the young couples whose fear of war founded the 1950s marriage, the Gladneys seek security in an uncertain world, and they do so by believing – not actually knowing – that their spouses will accept certain types of behavior. But where breadwinning husbands and stay-at-home wives often held to these expectations regardless of their spouse's (or their own) actual desires and perceptions, the Gladneys respond to one another and shape their expectations out of actual experience. In doing so, they reassert the conjugal couple as the most basic form of association, making it not a point of limitation and exclusion, but a means for welcoming and engaging others. These vows allow presence to be the founding element and, as Benjamin Hood and Sarah Pierce realized too late, can make the marital union the means by which one expresses devotion to his or her neighbors.

Notes

1 Weiss reminds readers that “Harriet Nelson, the actress, was a working mother with an accomplished career, even if Harriet Nelson, the character, played second fiddle to Ozzie on the show. Middle-class women, whose lives on the surface conformed with the June Cleaver stereotype, were in fact at the forefront of significant gender change in the postwar years.” (7)

2 The emphasis on the individual ultimately clashed with the separation of spheres “by making men and women depend upon each other and insisting that each gender was incomplete without marriage. It justified women’s confinement to the home without having to rely on patriarchal assertions about men’s right to rule. Women would not aspire to public roles beyond the home because they could exercise their moral sway over their husbands and through them over society at large. Men were protecting women, not dominating them, by reserving political and economic roles for themselves.” (176)

3 This problem is particularly apparent in Kant, who includes the marital contract as a subpoint of his discussion of property in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In typical fashion, Kant portrays the relationship as a burden one imposes on another, granting “the reciprocal use that one human being makes of the sexual organs and capacities of another,” thereby giving each other “lifelong possession of each other’s sexual attributes” (61-62). But because the contract prohibits the free use of one’s own body, Kant sees the restriction as different from those against murder or stealing; the restriction, in effect, “makes [the individual] into a thing” and therefore “conflicts with the right of humanity in his own person.” Kant solves this conundrum by introducing a third element – the child a couple creates through intercourse. By making procreation the ultimate end of marriage, Kant reframes the agreement as not just a contract decided by two unencumbered agents, but a law implemented for the good of the human race: “Even if it is supposed that their end is the pleasure of using each other’s sexual attributes, the marriage contract is not up to their discretion but is a contract that is necessary by the law of humanity, that is, if a man and a woman want to enjoy each other’s sexual attributes they MUST necessarily marry, and this is necessary in accordance with pure reason’s laws of right” (62). Hegel, who tried to reject Kant’s contractual model and posit marriage as an ethical good – the form through which an individual manifests his or her desires in society – runs into a similar wall in *The Philosophy of Right*. Foregrounding the communal nature of the nuptial bond, Hegel argues that the act transforms not only the two into one, but that procreation transforms the one into the many. Because the relationship forms a single person, it cannot be beholden to the individualism esteemed by romantics or allowed by Kant. But despite his attempts to separate himself from Kant

and discover a spiritual, intersubjective element in the conjugal pact, Hegel still ultimately falls back on contractual thinking, arguing that individuals gain social respect by entering to an association that reinforces strict divisions of spheres and gender roles: “Man therefore has his actual substantial life in the state, in learning [*Wissenschaft*], etc., and otherwise in work and struggle with the external world and with himself, so that it is only through his division that he fights his way to self-sufficient unity with himself. In the family he has a peaceful intuition of this unity, and an emotive [*empfindend*] and subjective ethical life. Woman, however, has her substantial vocation [*Bestimmung*] in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this [family] *piety*.” (166)

4 Pateman describes Hegel’s omission of the sexual contract in terms that recount his master/slave dialectic: “Hegel’s story of the development of universal freedom requires that men recognize each other as equals: the day of the master and slave is past. But men’s self-consciousness is not purely the consciousness of free civil equals (the story of the social contract) – it is also the consciousness of patriarchal masters (the story of the sexual contract). The ostensible universalism of Hegel’s public world (just like that of the classic contract theorists) gains its meaning when men look from the public world to the private domestic sphere and the subjection of wives. The family (private) and civil society/state (public) are separate and inseparable; civil society is a patriarchal order. As a husband, a man cannot receive acknowledgment as an equal from his wife. But a husband is not engaged in relations with other men, his equals: he is married to a woman, his natural subordinate. Wives do not stand to husbands precisely as slaves, but a wife cannot be an ‘individual’ or a citizen, able to participate in the public world. If the family is, simultaneously, to be part of the state and separate from it, constituted through a unique contract, and if patriarchal right is not to be undermined, women’s acknowledgment of men cannot be the same as men’s acknowledgment of their fellow men. Men cease to be masters and slaves, but Hegel’s social order demands a sexually differentiated consciousness (his discussion of ethico-legal love notwithstanding). The recognition that a husband obtains from a wife is precisely what is required in modern patriarchy; recognition as a patriarchal master, which only a woman can provide.” (178-179).

5 See Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*; Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*; McKeon, *The Secret History of Domesticity*.

6 See C.S. Lewis, *Allegories of Love*

7 There are, of course, some notable exceptions, such as homosexual characters like Shit and White Willie from Gaynor’s *Linden Hills* or the Davids from Jane Smiley’s *Good Faith*. Also, divorced or singles occasionally appear in these stories – Updike’s

Rabbit Angstrom or Barthelme's Peter Wexler, or Lee's Doc Hata and widower Jerry Battle. These characters are strong outliers, and usually either serve to provide guidance for other couples or to be marked as uncoupled. See Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture: Homecoming Queens*.

8 Though a modern fiction, the television *Mad Men* frames its affairs according to a similar logic. Against the two dominant identities he has constructed – the charismatic and powerful Madison Avenue ad man and the authoritarian and lavish suburban dad – protagonist Don Draper tries out different personalities with the women with whom he has affairs: when pursuing a painter from Greenwich Village, Don toys with a bohemian lifestyle; when with a female heir to a Jewish department store chain, Don becomes more sympathetic to women's rights. They are all means to an end for him, as is often in the case in such stories.

9 The phrase appeared as the blurb accompanying a cover story from *Time's* 4/26/68 issue.

10 These thinkers are far from the only philosophers engaging the question of marriage. Critics like Michael Warner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler have made cogent arguments against the heteronormativity that dominates the marriage conversation, both in the worlds of politics and fiction.

11 Midway through the novel, Jack sees Babette on the television and, in the same way their infant son Wilder cannot distinguish between his real mother and the image of her he sees in photographs, the appearance of her on the screen reduces Jack to an infant state: "her appearance on the screen made me think of her as some distant figure from the past, some ex-wife and absentee mother, a walker in the mists of the dead. If she was not dead, was I? A two-syllable infantile cry, *ba-ba*, issued from the deeps of my soul." (104).

12 According to John Frow, "*White Noise* is obsessed with one of the classical aims of the realist novel: the construction of typicality. What this used to mean was a continuous process of extrapolation from the particular to the general, a process rooted in the existence of broad social taxonomies, general structures of human and historical destiny. Social typicality precedes the literary type—which is to say that the type is laid down in the social world; it is prior to and has a different kind of reality from secondary representations of it. First there is life, and then there is art. In *White Noise*, however, it's the other way round: social taxonomies are a function not of historical necessity but of style." (420)

13 Nancy makes a much clearer rejection of the libidinous philosophy of Deleuze/Guattari and Hardt/Negri and their emphasis on potentiality: “But love is not ‘polymorphous,’ and it does not take on a series of disguises. It does not withhold its identity behind its shatters: it *is* itself the eruption of their multiplicity, it *is* itself their multiplication in one single act of love, it is the trembling of emotion in a brothel, and the distress of a desire within a fraternity. Love does not simply cut across, it cuts itself across itself, it arrives and arrives at itself as that by which nothing arrives, except that there is ‘arriving,’ arrival and departure: of the other, always of the other, so much *other* that it is never *made*, or *done* (one makes love, because it is never *made*) and so much *other* that it is never *my* love (if I say to the other ‘my love,’ it is of the other, precisely, that I speak, and nothing is ‘mine’).” (102)

14 For Nancy, the joy of interruption allowed by love requires the presence of an other: “It is the question of a presence: to joy is an extremity of presence, self exposed, presence of self joying outside itself, in a presence that no present absorbs and that does not (re)present, but that offers itself endlessly.”

CHAPTER V

DOMESTICATED STRANGERS:
CHILDREN AND ALTERITY

Deleuze and Guattari's emphasis on pure desire might, as my previous chapter contends, invite unethical egoism when applied to marital relationships, but the duo's analysis does powerfully indict Western child-rearing discourses. In their landmark work *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari claim that capitalism deploys the nuclear family as an agent of social production that inscribes itself "into the recording process of desire, clutching at everything," and performing

a vast appropriation of the productive forces; it displaces and reorganizes in its own fashion the entirety of the connections and the hiatuses that characterize the machines of desire ... reorganizes them all along the lines of the universal castration that conditions the family itself ... but it also redistributes these breaks in accordance with its own laws and the requirements of social production. (124)

In this way, the family "follows the pattern of its triangles" and distinguishes "what belongs to the family from what does not;" it directs desire – for example, modeling sexual attraction through the mother/father – and sets out restrictions, as in the incest taboo (125). This model reduces the child's infinite potential to a mere point in an Oedipal triangle, a variation of "mommy/daddy/me." Within this structure, the child's ultimate end is to mimic mommy or daddy, to follow the pattern set by the parents and

repeat the bondage on his or her own children. But even as they recognize the growing strength of these arrangements, Deleuze and Guattari also claim that the triangle is not perfect, that no market force can fully determine the subject: “The family is by nature eccentric, decentered. We are told of fusional, divisive, tubular, and foreclosing families ... Families are filled with gaps and transected by breaks that are not familial: the Commune, the Dreyfus Affair, religion and atheism, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascism, Stalinism, the Vietnam war, May ‘68 – all these things form the complexes of the unconscious, more effective than everlasting Oedipus” (97). Accordingly, the child remains fundamentally other to the parent: she cannot be fully known, he cannot be fully protected.¹ The unassailable difference between parent and offspring breeds an anxiety that is sublimated into stories about children, variously portraying offspring as helpless lambs or voracious killers.

The 1982 horror movie *Poltergeist* mines this tension for scares. The film focuses on the Freeling, an upper middle class family whose youngest daughter Carol Anne (Heather O’Rourke) has links to the spirit world that make her a target for malevolent demons. Carol Anne’s extra-sensory abilities are triggered by her occupancy in the Freeling’s suburban home, the finest in a modern planned community clandestinely built upon an old graveyard. Some of the movie’s most horrific images –a closet transformed into a gaping maw, skeletons emerging from an unfinished swimming pool, a tree from the front yard attacking the kids’ bedroom – alter the seemingly benign neighborhood into a hazardous place. This risk contradicts the sales pitches made by Freeling patriarch and star real estate agent Stephen (Craig T. Nelson), whose firm developed the

subdivision; far from the “whole generation of security” his employers promised, the suburb’s increasing perilousness directly implicates Stephen, who used his family’s contentment as a selling point to potential buyers. Despite the father’s complicity, the film also makes Carol Anne’s ethereal nature just as responsible, as she is the first to witness and communicate with the ghosts. The horror of *Poltergeist*, then, rests on two, possibly divergent postulates: Carol Anne is in danger, exposed to malicious forces lurking in her suburban neighborhood, and Carol Anne *is* the danger, possessing a mystic ability that calls the monsters forth.

These tensions are hardly unique to fright films like *Poltergeist*. As Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, youth may be “incomprehensible, repellent, or exciting,” but they remain “the children of grownups—a fact that domesticates their strangeness” (6). So while suburbanites expect blood ties to safeguard the parent/child relationship – rendering it a more stable community than those formed with neighbors, property owners, and spouses – the child’s inherent difference denies such pretensions, making these domestic strangers a favorite topic for writers of suburban fiction. Where postwar psychology has advocated programs to defend the child’s pre-social autonomy while simultaneously positioning the parents as the sole guardian and greatest hazard to this development, suburban fictions – set in a place designed to be safe for children and families – foreground children’s alterity from even their mothers and fathers. Sometimes, as I will demonstrate in my reading of John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*, this difference creates anxiety for one’s offspring, manifesting in scenes of kids endangered or dying; elsewhere, the child’s profound unknowability drives fictions about deadly

adolescents, alien others like “child-murderer” Richard Everett of Joyce Carol Oates’s *Expensive People*. But in the same way that Deleuze and Guattari insist that the family cannot fully determine individuals, leaving cracks as the model extends to larger society, I argue that the child’s unknowable otherness opens the space for ethical community, one based on what Jean-Luc Nancy called “myth, interrupted.” As I will demonstrate, these gestures toward association occur in most suburban childhood narratives, including *Garp* and *Expensive People*, but are particularly clear in Jeffery Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*, in which the nostalgic myths of childhood that make the young the subject of such scrutiny also reveal their great unknowability, shattering previous assumptions and opening the way for a more contingent form of community. As these stories reveal, the suburb is not a place where the child is subsumed into the family dynamic, no matter what fantasies of security might promise; rather, the very plurality of the site enhances a child’s Deluzian alterity, opening a space for ethical community.

Suburbia and the Myth of the Idyllic Childhood

The most iconic image from *Poltergeist*, that of Carol Anne engulfed by an other-worldly static from a television screen, provides a cogent metaphor for the suburban childhood. In her study *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, Lynne Spigel calls television an instrument of “social sanitation,” that creates “antiseptic spaces” by allowing “people to travel from their homes while remaining untouched by the actual social contexts to which they imaginatively ventured.” For parents, television helped “keep youngsters out of sinful public spaces, away from the countless contaminations of everyday life” and

“away from unsupervised, heterogeneous spaces” (35-36). As a result, television programs contributed to a growing myth of an idyllic childhood, for which suburbia served as the primary setting.² Parents and grandparents further perpetuated the myth when they misremembered their youth, confounding real events with idealizations to imagine a better childhood than they may have actually experienced. Accordingly, Stephanie Coontz explains, these notions of the “traditional family” are in fact “an ahistorical amalgam of structures, values, and behaviors that never coexisted in the same time and place,” conflating a 19th century middle class ideal that “revolves emotionally around the mother-child axis” with a later notion that “focused on an eroticized couple relationship” (*Never Were* 9). This nostalgia, combined with expanding attention to dysfunctions that went undetected or unreported in prior generations, namely physical and sexual abuse, led to greater emphasis on suburbia’s promise to provide safety and shelter. Such stories only multiplied as baby boomers grew older and retold their childhood through nostalgic television shows and movies like *The Wonder Years* and *Stand By Me*, making the “Cold War childhood” the “yardstick against which Americans assess contemporary childhood” (Mintz 41).

The strength of this nostalgia has increased alongside the amount of surveillance imposed upon children, which expanded and changed each generation following World War II. While, as discussed in chapter three, postwar anxiety drove young people into a hasty redefinition of traditional marriage, these new mothers and fathers maintained a fairly lax approach to childrearing, encouraging more free time and socialization for their children than would be afforded future generations. Following John Dewey’s early 20th

century “child-centered” pedagogy and convinced that the era’s economic gains would continue forever, postwar parents subscribed to a version of the American Dream that included success not only for the individual but also for his or her offspring; by securing property and financial stability, the suburbanite could provide them with an advantage over their peers.³ This narrative combined childrearing with material achievement, in which one’s young “provided tangible results of successful marriage and family life; they gave evidence of responsibility, patriotism, and achievement ... Even when child rearing led to stress and exhaustion, parents still pointed to their offspring with a sense of accomplishment.” (May 160). Achievement for the self, then, translated into achievement for one’s offspring, resulting in what Benjamin Spock – far and away the most prominent source of parental advice for middle class Americans in the 1950s and 60s – called “Child-Centered America.” Following Dr. Spock, these parents practiced a type of “permissiveness,” dedicated to replicating for their offspring the unreal and sanitized childhood they thought they had or deserved, certain that such a lifestyle would guarantee future prosperity. But this confidence faltered in the turbulent 1960s and 70s, making the mothers and fathers of these later generations more worried than their predecessors and driving them to impose greater regulations on their young.⁴ Instead of Spock’s self-help books, baby boomers relied more on extracurricular activities and programs – Boys and Girl Scouts, Church groups, school sports, etc. – which amounted to a “crack down on its kids, consciously (if not completely successfully) circumscribing their range of choices, patrolling their behavior, and supervising their activities” (Fass 11). This surveillance intensified as “personal anxieties about children (and social

anxieties about childhood) grew furiously. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a stretch of time in American history in which anxieties about children were more intense than in the two decades from 1980 to 2000, and this includes periods of severe depression and long wars with serious ramifications for the civilian population.” Afraid of everything from “predatory child-care workers” to “too much sugar in their diets,” the parents of the late 20th century transformed their young into “anxious dependents” (Fass 14).⁵ This approach certainly drew its share of detractors, such as Phillip Wylie’s anti-momism attack *A Generation of Vipers* or Christopher Lasch’s books *Haven in a Heartless World* and *The Culture of Narcissism*, but even these critics invoked images of endangered youths, suggesting that whatever the approach, children were always in trouble.⁶

Ironically, all of these theories – from Lasch’s ethos of confrontation to the permissiveness he decried – sought to defend the child’s autonomy by tying his or her individualism to the behavior of the parents, making “the mundane tasks of child rearing ... embroiled in issues of personality development” (Skolnick 70). This direct correlation between the youth’s selfhood and the mother and father’s actions position the child as a faltering extension to the mother and father, an attitude that can be traced to Rousseau’s novel *Émile, or On Education*. As in his other writings, Rousseau assumes the existence of a pre-social, fully formed consciousness, making education the process by which juveniles learn to realize their latent potential. Rousseau believed that although the only thing humans lack at birth “is the gift of education,” the education that men can best provide is to make use of the natural “inner growth of our organs and faculties” (*Émile*

6). But pairing the child's pre-social authenticity to the parent's behavior confounds these assumptions, highlighting their untenable expectations. Though encoded with the parents' DNA and raised according to their wishes, the children remain intrinsically and unavoidably other, a difference that denies the security implicit in Spock's advice or the overstuffed after-school schedule plaguing today's students. Indeed, Coontz contends, the myth of idyllic childhood motivating these programs ignores the fact that, to some extent "*all* of our children are 'at risk,'" because

we are fallible human beings in a society that expects us single-handedly, or at the most two-handedly, to counter all the economic ups and downs, social pressures, personal choices, and competing demands of a highly unequal, consumption-oriented culture dominated by exterior working conditions, interests-group politics, and self-serving advertisements for everything from toothpaste to moral values. (209-210)

The notion of a perpetually imperiled child – or its more cynical counterpart, the perpetually dangerous child – stems from the failure of the Oedipal triangle, as found in Deleuze and Guattari. The Oedipal triangle imagines the parent/child relationship as a perfect, well-cloistered community, in which the child is nothing more than a repetition of the self. Relegating offspring to a variation of "mommy/daddy" puts undue strain on both parent and child, limiting the young's potentiality and demanding the parent be responsible for every aspect of their progeny's life. Myths of a nostalgic childhood – even those that advocate a Rousseauist autonomy – rely on this conflation, ignoring the inherent and untraversable difference between parent and child. The failure to achieve the myth's promises creates a great anxiety in parents, sometimes manifesting a fear for the child who cannot be constantly protected and sometimes in a fear of the child who

remains fundamentally other. American fictions, and suburban fictions like *Poltergeist* in particular, draw from these dual concerns, often featuring spectacular carnage exacted on or by children and adolescents. As I will show in the three following sections, the horror of these stories rest on the child's intrinsic difference, and thereby rejecting the confines of strict communal homogeneity based on blood ties and gesture to the possibility of a community of difference, interrupting the myth of idyllic childhood with a myth of the unknowable child.

Fearful Dreamers in *The World According to Garp*

Narratives about childhood have, of course, long been a favorite subject for novelists, as the bildungsroman was essential to the evolution of the form. According to Leslie Fiedler, American writers eschewed the social development plots favored by their European forerunners, associating any induction into a community with entropy and death.⁷ Because the American writer's imagination focuses on the frontier – “the last horizon of an endlessly retreating vision of innocence ... the margin where the theory of original goodness and the fact of original sin come face to face” – their adolescent adventures are driven by an abiding desire to maintain this innocence and to avoid the carnal mortality inherent to adulthood (27). The American bildungsroman, therefore, culminated not in the domestication of raging Jane Eyre or in the sudden nobility of Oliver Twist, but in the protagonist asserting his or her difference from others. Indeed, as R.W.B. Lewis famously argued, the paradigmatic American character was a variation of the Biblical Adam, and the plot was that of a figure moving from a pre-lapsarian state to

one of Emersonian solitude within a crowd. The ultimate goal of this hero, then, is the establishment of an identity, of an ipsetic selfhood formed in isolation from others.

Given the preponderance of first person narrators in the American bildungsroman, critics contend that the establishment of identity requires the destruction of the hero's privacy, "perversely refusing to acknowledge any off-limit zones even as the reader winces on his behalf" (Tolchin 10). Like the images of retreat and innocence that fill these narratives, this language of destruction suggests an inherent danger in the discourse of childhood, the recognition that youth fades as quickly as it is described. For this reason, writes Rachel McLennan, stories about childhood necessarily involve a distancing and a shortcoming: after all, they are the only narratives whose authors and readers can only speculate or approximate the subject.⁸ According to McLennan, literary children are best imagined as "figurings" or "metaphors," something always obliquely approached, perpetually evading ontological stability. Nabokov best illustrates this difficulty, as Humbert Humbert spends much of the novel avoiding the fact that his Lolita is, at best, an approximation of the "real" Dolores Haze – that he could steal "the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of minor" because his quarry is only a textual figure (62). To that end, any number of fictions throughout American literary history have featured children in distress, including some of the most important canonical texts of the 19th century: Huck on the run from drunken Pap, Melville's Pip tossed from the *Pequod*, or Stowe sacrificing little Eva St. Clare to spur right-feeling in her readers. The trend continued in post-Civil War texts including Styron's *Sophie's Choice* and Morrison's

Beloved, which use the parent's involvement in their offspring's death to drive their plots.⁹

Because the space is so inextricably tied to modern myth of innocent childhood, the child endangerment trope takes a unique twist when applied to suburbia. As opposed to the heightened language used to imbue the death of a character like Stowe's Eva with cosmic importance, death scenes in suburban fiction tends to highlight the banality of the situation, linking the calamity to a commonplace object or activity: a haunted television in *Poltergeist* or the killer bed in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*; Ronnie McGorvey of *Little Children* kills a girl scout selling cookies and terrorizes families at a public pool; *The Ice Storm*'s Mike Williams is electrocuted while playing on a road near his house; Paul Hammer abducts Tony Nailles from a garden party in *Bullet Park*; Henry Park of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* loses his son during "a stupid dogpile" in his front yard; Rebecca Angstrom of the *Rabbit* tetralogy drowns in a bathtub; the title character of David Gates's *Jernigan* stumbles upon a teenager who killed himself while watching VHS tapes; and DeLillo's *White Noise* closes with toddler Heinrich peddling out of his driveway and into oncoming traffic.¹⁰ Proving the adage "most accidents happen at home," these stories suggest that, like the serial killer Michael Myers of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, death lurks behind every cupboard and waits in every garage.

On the surface, the prevalence of this motif serves a basic horror story task by making the commonplace alien, subverting the dreams promised to suburban home owners. More than a simple reversal of expectation, however, this juxtaposition of the horrific and the mundane reveals an anxiety on the part of the parent, an inability to

mediate the hazards their children face. If the postwar revision of the American dream is to provide a better lifestyle for your children, and if suburbia is understood to be central to achieving that goal, then authors who refigure the space into a juvenile death-trap upset that narrative: in these stories, parents who move their children to the suburbs do not evade the threat – they expose their young to it: *Little Children*’s Larry Moon rationalizes his vendetta against Ronnie McGorvey by appealing to the neighborhood’s desire for safety; Charles Burns’s *Big Baby* features a young boy who misidentifies molesters and wife beaters for aliens and mutants; William Cowling of Tim O’Brien’s *The Nuclear Age* supplements his neighborhood securities with a bomb shelter in the backyard; the Weisses of Raymond Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing” mistake a birthday cake baker for a malevolent stalker; the parents in Robert Coover’s “The Babysitter” get drunk at a party while their young die at home. In each of these cases, the parents’ efforts to safeguard their offspring in fact makes them vulnerable, rendering the adults not only powerless to save their young, but actually complicit in the child’s death.¹¹

T. S. Garp, the protagonist of John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978), spends much of the novel evading this complicity, going instead to extraordinary lengths to defend his progeny from what he considers an incessant stream of aggressors. Irving illustrates this attitude with Garp’s response to the novel’s most memorable scene, a car accident that leaves one child dead and another maimed for life. As the family convalesces at a seaside retreat, Garp tells his wife Helen, “I don’t blame you ... I don’t blame me either ... It’s the only way we can be whole” (427-428). Garp’s aversion to responsibility resonates within the world of the novel, as several characters conflate

wholeness with inviolability, from Garp's mother Jenny Fields – who advocates a fiercely anti-social brand of feminism (“In this dirty-minded world ... you are either somebody's wife or somebody's whore”) – to Garp's own pessimistic resilience (“In the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases”), the major figures seek isolated self-sufficiency (179, 688). Readers have been quick to identify this inviolability ethos, arguing that the characters desire not “communal endurance and vulnerability but ... solitary power and refuge” as primary modes of identity (Carton 57). But Garp's denial of guilt is puzzling and contradictory; after all, he actually did cause the accident when he turned out the headlights in the vehicle carrying his two sons and pulled into his driveway at full speed, unaware that the space was occupied by a car in which Helen was fellating her lover. Irving tempers the macabre imagery with a sense of cosmic justice: Helen's lover Michael, an unlikable college student who forces Helen into sexual performance, loses his penis; Garp, a writer who struggled to replicate his early work, shatters his jaw and must communicate through short notes; Helen atones for her indiscretion with a broken arm and a renewed commitment to motherhood; Duncan, the elder son whose eye is gouged out by an errant stick shift, becomes a visual artist; and Walt, the sickly and doted-upon younger son, is killed and lost forever. While one might argue that the seemingly firm relationship between crime and punishment operates according to a Calvinist moral equilibrium, the accident's grotesque mayhem suggests an order more complex than mere cause and effect, and the punishments reverberate far beyond the actions of the individual offender to affect even the most innocent bystander. So while the world according to Garp is a Hobbesian war of all against all, *Garp's* world according

to Irving is one in which obsessive paranoia makes enemies out of everyone around, transforming the fretful parent into the inescapable threat.

By his own admission, Garp is a “fearful dreamer” who interprets everything from a stuffy nose to immature babysitters as a direct assault on his offspring (311-312). To a certain extent, Irving seems to affirm Garp’s worries by filling the novel with sensational violence toward children: they are attacked by dogs, dangled off of rooftops, and raped and maimed by molesters. As a writer whose considers the world “unnecessarily perilous” for both children and adults – “If Garp could have been granted one vast and naive wish, it would have been that he could make the world *safe*” – Garp confronts his anxieties through his fiction, which Irving often includes in part or in whole as embedded narratives within the novel (279). In particular, the story “Vigilance” directly addresses the effect the fear for his children has on his relationships with his neighbors, giving a first-person account of a suburban vigilante who tirelessly trains to defend his family from the dangerous speeders blasting down his neighborhood’s streets. The narrator’s indefatigable diligence often invites him to divide the world into simple types, identifying most in his “neighborhood full of children” as utterly helpless, but singling out reckless drivers as lethally careless and taking the role of defender for himself. Accordingly, he describes himself as a type of superhero whose impropriety – “I can travel across lawns, over porches, through swing sets and the children’s wading pools; I can burst through hedges, or hurdle them” – represents heroic exceptionalism, a right afforded him because he is a father: the offending speeders are “almost always intimidated by my parenthood,” which “sobers them, almost every time” (323). The

logic of the story, then, eerily recalls Carl Schmitt's political theology, because the presence of children implies the presence of danger, and the father's role *qua* father necessarily puts him into eternal antagonism against the ever-present potential enemy.

In "Vigilance," as in Schmitt, the difference between friend and enemy is quite clear: the story's primary villain is a particularly belligerent young man in a "blood red" truck, while the hero's willingness to protect a laudatory little old lady justifies violent behavior. But contrary to this clarity and resolution, the narrator imagines his suburb as both a type of refuge from the more dangerous outer world – "in my neighborhood, the car is not king; not yet" – and as a perilous trap; "In my neighborhood there is no place to run," he explains in the opening lines, because "the sidewalks are threatened by dogs, festooned with the playthings of children, intermittently splashed with lawn sprinklers ... just when there's some running room, there's an elderly person taking up the whole sidewalk, precarious on crutches or armed with quacking canes" (322). So when the narrator claims that "it's the suburbs [he's] training for," he means not only that he prepares himself to defend the people within the neighborhood, but also that these people themselves present a type of inescapable danger. Simply put, suburbs are not safe because there are people in them. Accordingly, the narrator does occasionally forgo his firm distinctions and count himself among the dangerous suburbanites, recognizing that his actions often escalate the situation. "I should stop this crusade against speeders," he confesses to readers – "I go too far with them, but they make me so angry—with their carelessness, their dangerous, sloppy way of life, which I view as so directly threatening to my own life and the lives of my children." Similarly, when the little old lady asks

what the neighborhood would be like without him, he must admit that, “[w]ithout me ... this neighborhood would probably be peaceful. Perhaps deadlier, but peaceful” (331).

This admission, even at its most fleeting, complicates Garp’s understanding of the world as inherently threatening toward his children: in the same way that Garp’s own “filthy lust” implicates him in the sexual, gendered violence that permeates the novel, so also does his own presence and fear of violence create its own violence, often for his own children.¹² Appropriately, this problem is illustrated most vividly in an episode from Garp’s own life, in which he chases down a speeder who turns out to be “Mrs. Ralph,” the recently-divorced mother of one of Duncan’s friends. As foregrounded by her awkward and nondescript title – none of the Garps know her first or last name, and only speak of her as the mother of Duncan’s friend Ralph – Mrs. Ralph is ultimately an unknown to Garp, to whom he assigns an arbitrary signifier. Yet despite this capriciousness, Garp maintains his mistrust; his fear is only magnified when, after reluctantly allowing Duncan to have a sleepover at her house, Garp sees “a glow on the suburban horizon, which he imagined was the dreaded house of Ralph—in flames” and resolves to retrieve him from her clutches (262). While relating Garp’s twilight rescue, Irving reiterates the porous divisions between potential danger and real banality, beginning with Mrs. Ralph’s derisive greeting, “You’re too late ... Both boys are dead. I should never have let them play with that bomb” (282). Although the two clearly dislike and distrust each other, the narrator describes them as “a married couple” when they clean up after the boys together, underscoring an ontological inconsistency that only compounds when Mrs. Ralph asks Garp to eject an unidentified young man from her

bedroom (283). Where Garp, like the vigilante from his short story, tries to enforce civility moral and physical posturing, the other characters undermine his certainty by playing with identities: Mrs. Ralph tries to bolster Garp's position by insisting that he is her husband, while the lover asserts his rights as a guest by reminding them "she asked me in ... [i]t was her idea" (286). The slippery nature of identity is underscored by Mrs. Ralph's behavior throughout their interactions, sometimes flirtatious and other times resentful, leading to the climax of the rescue, in which the drunk, despondent, and mostly naked Mrs. Ralph demands that Garp "prove" that he finds her attractive by showing her his erection. More than an innocent tease, the command attempts to force all the players to show their selves: heretofore, the philandering Garp had attempted to obfuscate his very real physical attraction to Mrs. Ralph by framing his compliments as mere self-esteem boosters, but when Mrs. Ralph insists "[s]how me your hard-on and I'll believe you like me," she dismisses the vagaries of falsehoods and playfulness and compels Garp to reveal himself and his intentions (290). Likewise, when Garp assents and lowers his shorts, he chooses to quite literally expose himself – to present himself as neither a dangerous invader nor an antagonistic father, but as a potential lover, aroused by her presence.

The fact that Garp consents to Mrs. Ralph's conditions against some powerful deterrents – Mrs. Ralph's clear instability, the sleeping children downstairs, Garp's vows to his wife – highlights the fact that Garp has made a decision regarding his relationship to Mrs. Ralph. The importance of decision, of identifying the other person's identity and acting accordingly, underscores the entire scene, particularly in regards to potential

dangers. The need for decision has been present from his first encounter with Mrs. Ralph when, in spite of her speeding and her disheveled appearance, she repeatedly assures Garp, “Your kid’s safe with me ... Don’t worry, I’m quite harmless—with children” (256). But the very notion of the decision requires a certain degree of ontological surety, which Irving repeatedly denies Garp, forcing him to admit that he knew little about Mrs. Ralph and “simply disliked her, on sight” (242). Moreover, Irving highlights the arbitrary nature of Garp’s decision, explaining that poor Mrs. Ralph “was not the only victim perhaps slandered by his paranoid assumptions,” but that “Garp suspected most people to whom his wife and children were drawn; he had an urgent need to protect the few people he loved from what he imagined ‘everyone else’ was like” (243).

This confusion between Garp’s love for his family and his mistrust of all in proximity anticipates Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s reinterpretation of Deleuze and Guattari. They consider the need to excessively defend one’s children an unavoidable side effect of the nuclear family, a practice that corrupts the forms of love beneficial to the common and “unleashes some of the most extreme forms of narcissism and individualism” (161). According to Hardt and Negri, the family has restricted all alternative forms of affinity and relation, thereby transforming communal love into egoistic paranoia:

It is remarkable, in fact, how strongly people believe that acting in the interests of their family is a kind of altruism when it is really the blindest egotism. When school decisions pose the good of their child against that of others or the community as a whole, for example, many parents launch the most ferociously antisocial arguments under a halo of virtue, doing all that is necessary in the name of their child, often with the strange narcissism of seeing the child as an extension or reproduction of themselves. Political discourse that justifies interest in the

future through a logic of family continuity—how many times have you heard that some public policy is necessary for the good of your children?—reduces the common to a kind of projected individualism via one’s progeny and betrays an extraordinary incapacity to conceive the future in broader social terms.
(*Commonwealth* 161)

But *Garp* upsets the antagonistic aspect of the Oedipal triangle by refusing to endorse its title character’s fears, and in fact repeatedly collapses the distinction between safety and danger. Because Garp decides to retrieve Duncan on a whim and goes to Mrs. Ralph’s house wearing only jogging shorts in the middle of the night, the narration positions Garp as a threat who does not belong. When Garp creeps through the shrubs and fences, the narrator likens him to “a gunman hunting his victim, [or] the child molester the parent dreads” (279). The other people who see Garp sneaking around wearing only running shorts share this suspicion, such as the young woman who “thinks he is a would-be exhibitionist” and “cries out and wobbles her bike around him,” or the police officers who stop Garp on the way home and demand identification that he cannot provide (280). Of course, as Garp protests throughout, all of his actions stem from his love for his children, but the story never backs this position, portraying the hero’s fears as themselves frightening.

Irving himself admits to this conflation in the novel’s afterward, in which he explains that the book is ultimately about “a father’s fears.” So while *Garp* “is and isn’t ‘autobiographical,’” Irving admits, it is based in his real worry for his children. “I’m just a father with a good imagination,” Irving tells readers who express solidarity or condolences for his loss; “In my imagination, I lose my children every day” (xvi). Notice the active agent in these phrases: *I* lose my children, *I* imagine their deaths. Even as a

father whose children live relatively safe and healthy lives in the real world, Irving confesses that he – not the myriad forces that could kill them all – orchestrates their ends; it is for his sake, not for theirs, that he fights to defend them. Accordingly, T. S. Garp, a ridiculous character in an absurdly dangerous world, can be seen as a parodic attempt to assuage this guilt and fear, an exaggeration of the Oedipal triangle that bears down on Irving and makes him worry for his young. No more is this apparent than in the novel Garp writes after the accident, a pulpy crime thriller called *The World According to Bensenhaver* that is so offensive that, despite Garp's literary reputation, only a pornographic magazine dares publish it. Irving foregrounds the relationship between Garp and himself by including the entire first chapter of *Bensenhaver* within *Garp*, a lurid story about a suburban housewife who, to save her toddler, allows herself to be abducted and raped before gutting her attacker with a hunting knife. The bleak and merciless world of Adrian Bensenhaver, written by Irving as Garp, reflects the outlooks of both the fictional and actual author: it is his imagination that has made the world into his enemies, focusing on grisly deaths instead of potential lives.

Confessions of a Child-Murderer: The Alien Adolescent in Joyce Carol Oates's *Expensive People*

As with Irving, child endangerment is a reoccurring trope in Joyce Carol Oates's fiction, serving as a significant plot point in some of her most well-known novels, including *them*, *Zombie*, and *We Were the Mulvaney*s. "The Molesters," a short story published in the 1968 issue of the *Quarterly Review of Literature* continues this trend by employing a 9-year-old first person narrator who characterizes her parents'

overprotective clutching as something more unpleasant than the touch of the stranger who, calling himself a “second daddy,” finds her on an empty riverbank and undresses her. In that same year, Oates also published the novel *Expensive People*, in which protagonist Richard Everett reads the exact same story, reprinted in whole in the book, attributed not to Oates, but to Richard’s elusive mother. The story is only the most obvious of many similarities between Richard’s mother Natasha “Nada” Romanov (literally, “Nothing Novel”) and his author Oates: the two share similar physical characteristics and backgrounds, the two are both writers, and both live in Detroit suburbs. As with *Garp*, then, *Expensive People* is a novel that invokes the author’s biography; but where *Garp*’s metatextual elements explored a parent’s fear for his children, *Expensive People* is a metatextual novel about the fear of children. By giving her surrogate a child who purchases a rifle, becomes a suburban sniper, and eventually murders her – thereby becoming a “child murderer” – Oates uses child rearing as a metaphor for the creative process, highlighting the offspring’s inherent alterity from his or her parents. Invoking both commonplace portrayals of the suburbs and employing an unreliable, and therefore unthematizable, adolescent narrator, Oates parodies parent/child discourses that treat one’s young as an extension of the self and gestures toward a community of difference founded by the alien adolescent.

According to cultural critic Henry A. Giroux, stories about perilous adolescents have only expanded in the recent period of late capitalism. News reports about lawless street gangs or reality shows about over-privileged sixteen-year-olds reveal very little about actual teenagers, and instead work to frame them as “economically suspect.” An

author who has written extensively on the methods marketers use to hijack childhood discourses and better peddle their products, Giroux has argued that capitalism functions according to a new cult of youth, selling goods that claim to offer vitality and sexual allure, elements associated with the young.¹³ But where the target demographic had been adolescents, the growing influence of neoliberalism on American domestic policies has shifted emphasis to a “here and now” capitalism that denigrates attempts to save for future generations. Most Americans, Giroux insists, no longer consider youth “a social investment or the central element of an increasingly embattled social contract,” but rather split them into either “consumers, on the one hand, or as troubling, reckless, and dangerous persons, on the other” (3). Narratives about menacing teens serve a “theater of cruelty” for the social Darwinism advanced by neoliberals, justifying “responses to youth that were unthinkable 20 years ago, including criminalization and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, and zero tolerance policies that model schools after prisons” (17). In short, if the Oedipal triangle bound young children into a repeat of the self, then adolescents are too often dismissed as uncontrollable monsters.

More than their younger counterparts, adolescents are an easy target for such fear-mongering because of their liminal position between the dependent child and the fully autonomous individual. For that reason, argues Spacks, adolescents are also attractive subjects for writers who wish to “take the young seriously,” as few groups better embody the novel’s polyvocal nature. Since the concept of the adolescent was first introduced by G. Stanley Hall in the late 19th century, and then expounded upon by sociologists

Margaret Mead and Franz Boas in the 1930s, the indefinite, unmoored nature of this age group has been irresistible for authors: a person indefinitely between two milieus, challenging the hegemony represented by the father while looking toward the irresponsibility offered to children. “From *Tom Jones* to *The Catcher in the Rye*, [writers] have evoked adolescents who oppose the existent social order, enjoy more vital passionate involvements than their elders, face in their lives crucial and compelling decisions—the stuff of drama,” writes Spacks: “The adolescent’s efforts alternately to resist the adult world and to find a place in it focus sharply on that intersection of the personal and the social often declared the novel’s central concern” (15).

The notion was particularly useful for authors of postwar fiction, and it is unsurprising that Cold War literature featured some of the most enduring and striking adolescent characters, particularly Holden Caulfield of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* who, unlike the youthful characters that preceded him, endeavors less to find the freedom of Indian territories or whaling ships, and instead sought some type of authenticity outside the “phonies” running adult society. For critics a number of critics, including Fiedler, Van Wyck Brooks, and Ihab Hassan, the adolescent’s indeterminacy reflects the mood of a nation in its own adolescence:

Caught as he is between two worlds, the adolescent engages in a dialectic to reconcile both worlds to his own. He knows the urgency of instincts and requires the most exacting morality; he partakes of the past and looks to the future; he insists on freedom and seeks authority. His deepest allegiances are torn between the looming figures of Father and Mother. He appears, in fact, at once innocent and guilty, hopeful and disillusioned, Arcadian and Utopian, empirical and idealistic. (Hassan 314)

Abigail Cheever's argues that novels of adolescence assume "a self that is under constant revision," and the protagonist's "private struggle with authenticity thus models itself as a developmental problem — a dangerous consequence of the interaction between the evolving self and the cultural circumstances in which that self is situated." Accordingly, "one can begin to see why the adolescent herself emerges as a locus around which questions of authenticity are focused in the period — and how adolescence itself might crucially emerge as a type of permanent condition: an outlook or an attitude, rather than a developmental stage" (32, 45). Similarly, Kirk Curnutt has uncovered a further evolution of the adolescent figure, arguing that even the demands for authenticity have lapsed: against the "teenage resistance to social authority" that, for many authors, embodied "the national myth of self-reliance," contemporary fiction credits "youth's disaffected dispositions ... not to the oppressiveness of adult authority but to a lack of it" (94). Rewrites or homages to *Catcher* like Brent Easton Ellis's *Less than Zero* or Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* feature "aimless, amoral mifs [who] cry out for adult intervention as they beg entry into the shelter of homes" (95).

Under the influence of the aforementioned nostalgia that dominates the postwar period, discourses about adolescents tend to frame this discontent as something frightening, revealing "as much fear as sympathy, as much dread as love. The conflict between anxiety and sympathy – our fears both of and for the child – manifests itself not only in the polarized images broadcast by the mass media but in the disagreements dividing academic and professional opinion" (Pifer 14). Indeed, while the fear of the child's difference from his or her parents might be an unconscious source of the

threatened child motif, it is the explicit recognition of the adolescent's difference, often manifesting in a rejection of the parent's beliefs and desires, which renders them unrecognizable and frightening. This is particularly true of suburban characters like Mike Williams or Paul Hood of Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, the mutated teens in Charles Burns's *Black Hole*, or the disaffected and over-privileged characters in Bret Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* or *The Rules of Attraction*. They carry both the disgust for inauthenticity found in the first wave of postwar adolescents combined with the desire for engagement that characterizes the second wave. The suburbs promise the American Dream, but adolescence reject this expectation in hopes of redefining it for themselves. The literature "literature of adolescence," then, in documenting the struggles between the young and the old, "explore[s] the dramatic possibilities of youth or didactically diagnose[s] its weaknesses and failures," thereby "consistently perceive[ing] open or concealed struggles for dominance between generations" (Spacks 18)

The failure of the American Dream provides a loose connective strand for the four novels in Joyce Carol Oates's Wonderland Quartet: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968), *them* (1969), and *Wonderland* (1971). Although each entry has only a tangential relation to the other, *Expensive People* is the most dissimilar of the four: where the others employ gritty realism to illustrate the lower class's struggle to achieve the dream, *Expensive People* is an allusive, postmodern confession about the highly affluent's privileged lifestyle. Widely considered a lesser entry in Oates's oeuvre, *Expensive People* seems to baffle its readers: commenters tend to either view it as simply an anti-suburban satire, making it a counterpoint to the rest of the Wonderland Quartet, or

they apply a psychological and sociological approach that renders it a gendered “anxiety of influence” novel, in which Oates’s attacks her “forefathers” (predominately Nabokov) while illustrating the author’s distance from her own creative offspring.¹⁴ Of course, both approaches are correct, but separating one from the other does each a disservice. Setting the story anywhere but a supposedly safe neighborhood that puts a premium on conformity would rob the matricide plot of its horror; without the metatextual elements informing Richard’s decision to become a suburban sniper, then the critique of suburbia feels bland and toothless, surpassed by even as artless a critic as journalist John Keats, to say nothing of a talent like Richard Yates. As a narrative about a creation taking on its own destructive life, however, *Expensive People* foregrounds not only the fear attached to unfamiliar nature of adolescents, but also the way this difference can disrupt inauthentic relationships to one’s neighbors.

Central to Richard’s transformation into a child murderer – and, in fact, the entire novel’s notion of family – is the unreal sitcom suburb in which the Everetts live. Oates accentuates the banality of suburbia by drawing from a number of pop-culture stereotypes, most vividly in a comic anecdote in which the Everetts, shortly after moving to “a far-flung suburb of a famous American city,” encounter a man who might be Griggs, a neighbor with whom they lived in “a suburb of another famous city” (15). The indistinction in Richard’s descriptions both highlights the common charge that suburbia is a nowhere – a place where residents are so petty that they do not “spill drinks, upset trays, burn holes in tables or rugs, because by doing such things they would come loose and these people never come loose” – and foreshadows the play of misrecognition that

will occur throughout the interaction between patriarch Elwood Everett and the “man who might have been Griggs” (45, 16). The two men commence by trading fleeting glances, over- or under-playing their reactions to avoid betraying too much – “the gentleman in the car nodded at us and smiled uncertainly. Father, a little confused, nodded energetically and smiled back” – before finally doing “the only right thing” and actually speaking with one another in limp, imprecise terms. In between exchanging vagaries about the town, the men both wait for “the moment for them to admit knowing each other or to puzzle out identities,” instead of “star[ing] worriedly at each other,” but because such a breakthrough would require an honest revelation of identity, it never comes (33). The narrating Richard draws attention to similar images of staring throughout the conversation, adding an intensity to the relatively useless words the men share; Richard describes the two looking at each other “with reddening faces,” and Griggs smiling shakily at Father, as if Father represented something terrifying he did not want to concede,” and later giving Richard “a look of muted, uneasy recognition” (32). This “uneasy recognition” adeptly captures the tone of the novel’s social engagements, as people meet and interact with one another, often feel compelled to respond, but ultimately evade this responsibility for the sake of social status or a predetermined identity; if Elwood admitted to knowing Griggs, he would be recognizing a deeper relationship and a sense of obligation. Accordingly, the family treats these encounters as invasions and feels trapped in a neighborhood full of people. “The bastard was just as terrified at seeing us as we were at seeing him,” Nada observes at the end of the

conversation, framing faux-Griggs' potential recognition as a type of attack; "None of us can ever escape" (38).

While relatively comic when manifested in awkward conversations between bumbling neighbors, this logic of uneasy recognition becomes more problematic when applied to the family dynamic. The narrating Richard connects the irresponsibility of Elwood and Griggs to his relationship to his parents by interrupting the account of the conversation to describe a brief moment of relative happiness between the Everetts, as "the first few weeks in a new home ... drew us close together" (15). And yet, Richard's increasingly melancholy narration undoes the perfect image he constructs, as he admits that the trio "had the look of being three strangers who met by accident on a walk and are waiting for the first chance to get away from one another" (32). Not coincidentally, Richard employs these descriptors just before relating the interaction between two strangers who meet by accident and cannot wait to get away from each other: Elwood and Griggs. In the same way the two men, based on their shared history and experiences, "should" know one another, but refuse to fully recognize each other, Richard feels that Elwood and particularly Nada should know him and relate to him. Against his family's failures of responsibility, the narrating Richard becomes a domineering puppet master in his memoir, pretending that he "possessed" his parents and, under his control, "they belonged to each other, they were in love," a phrase he repeats throughout his story (16). By linking this desire to the Griggs debacle, Richard reveals the primary impetus behind his confession and, indeed, his eventual crime: to force his parents to forgo their materialistic posturing and to respond to him.

To this end, Richard dwells on Nada's irresponsibility and inhospitality to him, presenting her as a phantasmal visitor more than a flesh-and-blood mother. Richard embarks on his rampage only after Nada denies him and Elwood multiple times, disappearing for weeks at a time for no reason, and after he learns that she was not a Russian immigrant, but the daughter of shopkeepers from the Midwest. While this groping toward freedom might seem like an understandable antidote from the shackles of the Oedipal triangle, Nada's insistence that there is "nothing personal, never anything personal in freedom," suggests that she feels no obligation to others, not even to her son (78). Richard rejects this belief when, shortly before purchasing his gun, he laments,

I never meant anything to her, never! I was perhaps some outlandish protoplasmic joke Father had wished upon her one night late after a cocktail party. I was flesh and bone and blood and brain tagged "Richard," and "Richard" must have evoked in her mind mechanical thoughts of guilt and responsibility and love. She loved me when she was happy. She loved me when she happened to notice me. She loved me if I was good, if Father was good, if she'd been invited out both nights of a weekend, if the world was going well, if the humidity was low and the barometer agreeable: whereas I loved her always, when she was a bitch or when she was saintly, lovely or ugly, with short shining hair or long greasy hair ... I loved her and what good did it do either of us? (77)

Accordingly, Richard's decision to purchase a gun and terrorize the neighborhood is a reaction to the irresponsibility he sees, a desire to provoke some response. He does so by refusing the ideal myths to which his parents subscribe and changing into something horrifying, culminating in Nada's death. Nada's death is tragic, as Richard draws his suburban sniper idea from one of her stories, thereby offending both her maternal and authorial intentions, and Oates uses the plot to illustrate the disconnection between a writer and her work, suggesting that if not even an author can determine her creation,

then no parent can hope for control over an autonomous person. Indeed, much of Richard's discourse works to assert this difference, upsetting and rejecting his reader's assumptions about youth. "You people who have survived childhood don't remember any longer what it was like," he declares to readers:

You think children are whole, uncomplicated creatures, and if you split them in two with a handy ax there would be all one substance inside, hard candy. But it isn't hard candy so much as a hopeless seething lava of all kinds of things, a turmoil, a mess. And once the child starts thinking about this mess he begins to disintegrate as a child and turns into something else—an adult, an animal. (23)

The ultimate horror, the book seems to suggest, is not Richard's murderous pretensions – indeed, the novel ends on an ambiguous note, suggesting that he never killed anyone, not even Nada – but his alterity, his unknowability.

Reading Richard's confession as an affront to discourses of suburban childhood addresses the novel's odd ending. The story's refusal to cohere, combined with Richard's contradictory references to his corpulence and to his fear of dissipating, makes its narrator a character of exceedance as described by critics like Andrew Gibson, who evade interpretation and surprise readers, thereby troubling the assumptions about childhood and innocence that Oates invokes when telling her story about artist's anxiety. In the same way Richard prompts a response in his implied reader, so also does the fictional Richard upset the assumptions in the real reader, creating a fissure in the Oedipal triangle and forcing the reader to reconsider myths about childhood. As I will demonstrate in my reading of Jeffery Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*, this interruption and recreation of

myth opens the way for a different form of community, in which children are central not for their vulnerability, but for their unknowability.

“We had never known her:” The Mythological Girls of *The Virgin Suicides*

Like *Expensive People*, Jeffery Eugenides’s 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides* takes place in a Detroit suburb in the mid-1970s, and like Richard Everett, its central characters – the five adolescent Lisbon sisters – become horrifying when they disrupt the neighborhood’s myth of childhood. But where Richard’s suburban sniper persona fails to elicit much of a response from his acquaintances, the Lisbon girls forever shatter their neighborhood’s pretensions to safety by killing themselves over the course of a year. After youngest girl Cecelia fails in her initial attempt, psychiatrist Dr. Hornicker asks, “What are you doing here, honey? You’re not even old enough to know how bad life gets” (5). A year later, after the remaining four sisters tried to kill themselves on the same night, an attempt that was successful for all but one, an exasperated neighbor sneers, “Shit ... what have kids got to be worried about now? If they want trouble, they should go live in Bangladesh” (247). Despite the very different sentiments, both statements reveal a central assumption: suicide should not happen to these girls, in this place. The “should” statement this invokes, then, recalls the myth of the ideal childhood described by Coontz and other historians, the assumption of perfect safety and tranquility that has motivated suburban development for generations. In rejecting the promise of suburban safety, *The Virgin Suicides* directly addresses this myth, reformulating it by

making the girls tragic figures and positing new form of responsibility, in which children are still integral, but in a way that uses their mystery to welcome, not to shun, difference.

As thinkers from Plato to Hegel to Heidegger have stated, myths are integral to community, providing individuals with a reason for being together. Like the liberal contractualism represented by CC&Rs or HOAs, communal myths provide a schematic of interaction and identity; they help members understand their place among each other. To that end, the nostalgic myth of suburban childhood gives imminence to the neighborhoods found in stories like *Garp*, *Native Speaker*, and *Little Children*. Jean-Luc Nancy explores this function when he explains that “[a]ll myths are primal scenes, all primal scenes are myths;” they are essentially “of and from the origin, [as] it relates back to a mythic foundation, and through this relation it founds itself (a consciousness, a people, a narrative)” (45). And yet, despite their necessity for community, Nancy warns, myths also run the risk of becoming “totalitarian,” reducing real and infinite individuals into roles defined by these stories. In the same way, then, “myth and myth’s force and foundation are essential to community and that there can be, therefore, no community outside of myth ... [t]he interruption of myth is therefore also, necessarily, the interruption of community” (57). The interruption of myth draws attention to the its own shortcomings and prompts a new communal myth, a new coming together and rebuilding of a community in the gaps caused by interruption. Both *The World According to Garp* and *Expensive People* gesture toward this interruption, but it is central to Euginides’s *The Virgin Suicides*, a story about a neighborhood’s reaction to ineffable grief, a tragedy that

shatters the myth of suburban childhood and forces the survivors to reevaluate their relations to each other.

Eugenides's narrative both illustrates and humanizes the process of myth making and breaking described in *Nancy* by portraying the different reactions to the death of the Lisbon girls. The initial culprit identified is Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon themselves, a conservative couple who grows more strict after Cecelia's death and nearly draconian after the girls try to rebel. Eugenides portrays the elder Lisbons as simultaneously graceless in their severity – which climaxes in a total cloistering of the girls, pulling them from school and non-Sunday church activities – and genuine in their love for their troubled daughters. When an elderly Mrs. Lisbon, reflecting on the events decades later, tells her interviewers, “None of my daughters lacked for any love. We had plenty of love in our house,” Eugenides gives readers no reason to doubt her, but his descriptions of the house highlight the family's corrosive isolationism (84). After they lock themselves in, the house begins to show “signs of uncleanness,” where “[d]ust balls lined the steps” and a “half-eaten sandwich sat atop the landing where someone felt too sad to finish it;” later “the soft decay of the house began to show up more clearly” when the boys noticed “how tattered the curtains had become, then realized we weren't looking at curtains at all but at a film of dirt, with spy holes wiped clean” and how “the gutters sagged” (50, 160). When Mr. Lisbon, the last member of the family to continue interacting with his neighbors, hides away as well, the narrator exclaims “[n]ow the house truly died ... becoming one big coffin” (163). As this final phrase suggests, the narrative conflates removal, no matter how reasonable, with death, thereby rejecting the myths advocated by

Lasch and Spock: like Deleuze and Guattari's Oedipal triangle, these expectations limit individuals and fail to respond to them as infinite others. So while the Lisbons act out of love and concern for their children, their restrictions were ultimately unethical, destroying the inherent potentiality of life.

Against the totalizing by the elder Lisbons, the rest of the neighborhood experiences a brief being-toward-death, shocked into authentic responsibility by Cecelia's demise. Like Nancy, Roberto Esposito argues that wounds are inherent to community, as the root word "munus" can be translated as "debt" or "wound." If the wound is necessary for association, then

The "immune" is not simply different from the 'common' but is its opposite, what empties it out until it has been completely left bare, not only of its effects but also of its own presupposition; just as the 'immunization' project of modernity isn't directed only against specific *munera* (class obligations, ecclesial bonds, free services that weigh on men in the earlier phase) but against the very same law of their associated coexistence. (12)

Just such improper wound occurs in the novel when the neighborhood comes together to remove the fence on which Cecelia was impaled after she threw herself from the window. The narrators describe the project as "the greatest show of common effort we could remember in our neighborhood, all those lawyers, doctors, and mortgage bankers locked arm in arm in the trench, with our mothers bringing out orange Kool-Aid, and for a moment our century was noble again." Indeed, the entire act becomes transformative, changing their "paper-pushing" fathers into "Marines hoisting the flag on Iwo Jima" (53-54). In fact, the act transforms nearly all aspects of neighborhood interactions: although the removal offended a number of property rights and assumptions – it was on the

Lisbon's property, but the men of the suburb had to intrude on the adjacent yard to pull it out – the neighbors forego their own desires to care for this family. They secured legal permission, procured the necessary tools, and performed the removal all without expecting payment or even consulting Mr. Lisbon – the need exceeded the confines of propriety. Eugenides highlights the emphasis of ethics over propriety with the neighborhood boys' reactions, amazed that the truck that pulled out the fence "gave Mr. Bates the worst lawn job we'd ever seen" and that "Mr. Bates didn't scream or try to get the truck's license plate, nor did Mrs. Bates, who had once wept when we set off firecrackers in her state-fair tulips—they said nothing, and our parents said nothing." Although the boys' summary of the events – "for all their caretaking and bitching about crab-grass they didn't give a damn about lawns" – reads like a naïve joke on the part of the observers, it reveals a greater order (55). Certainly, the suburbanites of *The Virgin Suicides*, like those of many other fictions addressed in this study, care deeply for their lawns, associating them with a form of ethical selfhood; however, Cecelia's death was so great, so offensive to their notions of decorum that it shocked them into responsibility. In the remains of the old myth of a safe, idyllic neighborhood, the residents form a new myth based on concern for their hurting neighbor.

Initially, this new myth functions according to the heightened fictionality Nancy describes, which prioritizes the infinity of individuals over the static nature of firm figures. Early in the proceedings, the neighbors insist that the girls' death involves something that exceeds the simple understanding of the childhood myth, as demonstrated by the note one leaves for Mrs. Lisbon: "I don't know what you're feeling. I won't even

pretend” (46). But as the situation progresses – rebellious daughter Lux’s behavior goes more wild and the other girls eventually commit suicide – the neighbors seek an answer, collapsing the girls’ excessive otherness into neat caricatures: the local intellectual attributes the loss to the “spiritual bankruptcy” of late capitalism, while another claims that the girls carried “the ‘bad genes’ that caused cancer, depression, and other diseases” (231, 247). The most pronounced example is Ms. Perl, a reporter who writes about “The tony suburb known more for debutante parties than for funerals of debutante-aged girls” and “The bright bouncy girls show little sign of the recent tragedy.” Ms. Perl weaves the girls’ lives into a palatable, and ultimately forgettable, narrative of “suicide pacts” and obsession with the dark lyrics of a Goth pop group (92). As indicated by the narration, Ms. Perl and her fellow journalists reduce the girls to simple figures, exploring “less and less ... why the girls had killed themselves” and instead “talked about the girls’ hobbies and academic awards,” and other irrelevant facts (219).

In short, the parents diminish the exceedance and otherness of the girls, treating them like knowable cyphers while framing their deaths as something exceptional and unlikely. As Nancy warns, their rebuilt totalizing narrative precludes further interruption and thereby inhibits community by removing potential for singularity, a development Euginides illustrates when he describes “people [speaking] of the Lisbon girls in the past tense ... with the veiled wish that she would hurry up and get it over with” (219). The explanations given by various characters might be sensible – “Unfortunately, we had problems of our own” – but they also reveal a certain selfishness, a need to return to normal at the cost of another person’s suffering (44). After being thrust into something

unknowable by the girl's death, they ultimately decide to recreate the myth again, dismissing the Lisbons as an exception that ultimately has little bearing on their lives.

Conversely, the Lisbon girls remain an irresistible mystery for the neighborhood boys who watched them as youths and continue to obsess about them as adults. The now-grown boys serve as narrators for the novel, mixing their memories with archival evidence and information gleaned from interviews conducted in the decades following the Lisbon girls' deaths. Eugenides uses a narrative trick to illustrate the boys' community, relating the story through a collective first-person "we" while still referring to individual members of the group. By switching between the collective "we" and the singular individuals – "Tim Winer compared the tree to the last speaker of Manx" (242), etc. – Eugenides reveals the boys to be the type of community described by Esposito and Nancy, simultaneously joined together and individualized. The myth that connects them is the Lisbon girls, but even as they tell and retell the story, each definition or comprehensive explanation they devise ultimately falls short. So while, for example, the boys' "own knowledge of Cecilia kept growing after her death," it rarely expands beyond coincidental interactions in the neighborhood: "We had stood in line with her for smallpox vaccinations, had held polio sugar cubes under our tongues with her, had taught her to jump rope, to light snakes, had stopped her from picking her scabs on numerous occasions, and had cautioned her against touching her mouth to the drinking fountain at Three Mile Park" (37).

To be certain, there is an exploitative and invasive element to the boy's interest – "I'm going to watch those girls taking their showers," one declares – from which

Euginides never turns away; but this bravado often falls short when as the Lisbons resist and exceed these simple figures (8). This tragic resistance is most pronounced in Lux Lisbon's sexual rebellion, in which she invites various men and boys from the city and adjacent neighborhood to have sex with her on the roof of her parents' house. Even though the boys gawk and leer, Lux's ferociousness becomes frightening and alien, forcing them to resort to ridiculous malapropisms to describe the actions they see – "we spoke of 'yodeling in the canyon' and 'tying the tube,' of 'groaning in the pit,' 'slipping the turtle's head,' and 'chewing the stinkweed'" – revealing their boasting to be a type of ignorance, a conscious unknowing (141). Similarly, their interest at times takes on a surreal romanticism, in which they become enamored with their "new mysterious suffering, perfectly silent, visible in the blue puffiness beneath their eyes or the way they would sometimes stop in mid stride, look down, and shake their heads as though disagreeing with life" (49). The boys ascribe unreal properties to the girls, associating them with Catholic chastity after finding a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary among Cecelia's belongings, and later translating the Lisbons' defense of the neighborhood trees as a type of pagan earthiness. They pour over the girls' belongings, using any excuse to enter the house as a means to shoplift certain objects and imbue them with an almost mystical quality; after one boy sneaks into the bathroom, he returns to his compatriots to describe the "deodorants and perfumes and scouring pads for rubbing away dead skin, and we were surprised to learn that there were no douches anywhere because we had thought girls douched every night like brushing their teeth" (8).

And yet, every time the boys believe they have comprehended the Lisbons, that they have defined them to the point of knowable objects for their group, the girls reveal their confounding nature. They interrupt the myth, never more vividly than when, using Morse code and pop song messages, they lure the boys to the Lisbon house to witness their suicides. As the narrator summarizes, “We had never known her. They had brought us here to find that out” (215). As they do for the neighborhood parents, the girls’ death shatters the myth that’s developed around them. But for the narrating boys, it is a constantly interrupting myth, a story told and re-told.

And so despite the unquestionably dark nature of *The Virgin Suicides*, it ultimately moves toward a type of belonging only gestured toward in *The World According to Garp* and *Expensive People*, one where people respond to and care for one another, even as they maintain an unknowability that resists conscription into stultifying roles. Such a community is possible within suburbia, these novels contend, but only when a nostalgic myth of a perfectly safe childhood, one conscripted and controlled by parents, is discarded for a new myth. Against the paranoid antagonism or fearful ostracizing invited by the conceptions of childhood that dominate American suburbs, this new myth, based on the unknowable alterity of the child, requires a new narrative and new relation, one that responds to the child’s ever-changing difference as much as it based in the parents’ love for their young. No longer a restrictive bond based on sameness, the redefined parent/child relationship can become a model for the ethical communities possible in suburbia, a relationship of responsibility that admits both the infinity of and need to care for those in proximity.

Notes

1 Deleuze and Guattari are hardly the first to insist on the difference between the child and its parents. Indeed, at the end of *The Eumenides*, the final play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, Apollo decides that Orestes is not guilty of matricide, despite killing his mother Clytemnestra, because he is unrelated to her since the mother is a stranger to her child, serving as merely a receptacle for the man's reproductive material.

2 See Brown, *Images of Family Life in Magazine Advertising, 1920-1978* for a collection of advertisements related to suburbia, many of which feature a focus young children.

3 In *Experience and Education*, Dewey writes, "To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means to attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world." (6)

4 As Weiss makes clear in her analysis of 1950s self-help books and articles, which followed Spock's advice and example, offered an "external reference by which to measure one's performance" (94). And while books like Spock expressed concern that too much involvement by the mother and too little from the father will irreparably harm children, they also reveal the extent to which children are treated as miniature versions of the self.

5 And while these "anxious dependent" parents did their best to maintain their own control over their children, they could only do so much, and counted on the community and governmental services that took over – such as church youth groups, tutoring services, or high school sports – leading to a regimented life. As Fass observes, this generation of parents, "many of whom had been in revolt against the organization man portrayed by psychologist William Whyte in the 1950s, helped create the organization child of the 1980s and 1990s, unwittingly reacting against the very changes they helped to initiate" (16).

6 Lasch drew correlations between permissiveness and what he perceived as a growing egoism in American culture, arguing that lax parenting diminishes the child's social development by removing the potential struggle between the id and super-ego, rendering the child self-centered and detached.

7 In *The Writer in America*, Van Wyck Brooks argues that the American novelist remains inherently childish because he/she has no mature models: "The important thing is that they should transcend the juvenile roles they so often perform,—the role of the

playboy, the tough guy, the groping adolescent,— in which they perpetually repeat themselves and exploit their personalities until they are as tired of themselves as we are tired of them. Only the right models, rightly chosen to fit their special aptitudes, can jog them out of these roles into which they settle, models whom they cannot ‘knock out of the ring’ because they are a sort of superior selves, of the same nature with them but enlarged and ripened.” (85)

8 See Honeyman, *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction*; Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture*; Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*.

9 Edna Pontellier of Chopin’s *The Awakening* is a notable exception to this trope – as she swims away from the shore at the end of the story, she imagines her “children appear[ing] before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul’s slavery for the rest of her days” (108).

10 Richard Ford’s *Independence Day* certainly belongs to this set of stories, as Bascombe becomes responsible only when his son Paul is gravely injured. However, unlike other characters, Paul harms himself when he walks into the path of a fastball. Furthermore, the injury occurs away from suburban Haddam, taking place at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. And yet, the basic theme is the same: the father’s failure results in the near death of the son.

11 Most often, the character who either feels responsible for endangering the children, or at least receives blame from the story perspective, is the father.

12 Several critics have questioned Irving’s decision to align the feminist movement with, at best, curmudgeonly Jenny Fields or, at worst, the violent and delusional Ellen Jamesians. See Doane, “Women in *The World According to Garp*.”

13 See *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, *Stealing Innocence: Corporate Culture’s War on Children*, and *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*.

14 See Araújo, “Space, Property and the Psyche: Violent Topographies in Early Oates Novels;” Cologne-Brookes, Gavin. *Dark Eyes on America: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*; the third chapter of Daly, *Lavish Self-Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*, and Johnson, *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

“AMERICAN MEANS BEING WHATEVER YOU WANT:” CONTEST AND COLLABORATION IN GLOBAL SUBURBIA

In his conclusion to *The Crabgrass Frontier* – still the most frequently cited history of suburbia – Kenneth T. Jackson claims that reasonable people in 1985 could “debate whether the United States was a racist nation, an imperialist nation, or a religious nation [but] scarcely anyone could quarrel with its designation as a suburban nation” (284). Although Jackson does adeptly capture the contentious nature of the country under Reagan, the U.S. certainly earned that designation long before those final years of the Cold War. Most notably, Vice President Richard Nixon made a similar and more spectacular claim in July of 1959, when he and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev held their famous impromptu “Kitchen Debate.” Initially intended to be a friendly public relations meeting at the American National Exhibit in Moscow’s Skolniki Park, the two men used the opportunity to contrast the virtues of their respective economic models. Insisting that it would be “better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strengths of rockets,” Nixon took the lead by praising American televisions and appliances as evidence of his country’s superiority (Perlstein 95). The centerpiece of Nixon’s argument was a model suburban house, nicknamed “Splitnik” because “it had a path cut through the middle to allow crowds to walk through the interior” (Safire).¹

According to Nixon, the significance of the house was not just its marvelous modern conveniences – accoutrements that Khrushchev dismissed as “gimmicks” – but rather its egalitarian nature. This was the “typical American home,” not a mansion reserved for the East Coast Elite or for the glamorous Hollywood set, but a luxury available to even “any steel worker” (Perlstein 92).

Nixon’s claims were, of course, false – a bit of exaggerated showmanship from a politician better remembered for his lack of televisual flair² – because no American could afford Splitnik: it was not a home at all, but a show, a simulacrum. Despite this inauthenticity, Nixon’s invocation of the suburbs powerfully realized a claim implicit in the arguments of the Levitts and of Senator McCarthy, not to mention hundreds of advertisements and *Home Beautiful* articles: to be suburban is to be American. But where the message had heretofore been directed at other Americans, who believed the model manifested Hoover’s redefinition of the American Dream, Nixon’s performance turned the message outward, making suburbia “the center of the postwar global discourse” (Beauregard 170). The maneuver was more successful than the Vice President could have imagined: in the decades that followed, suburbia has become one of the U.S.’s most powerful ideological exports, to the point that similar neighborhoods in cities from London to Capetown to Tokyo are still considered faux-American.³ The suburbs put a physical face on the American Dream – a face that looked outward to the rest of the world.

I close my study of suburban narratives on the implications of this globalizing myth. If suburbia is an imagined community disseminated by various forms of narrative,

how does this myth change when placed in a global context? Or, to put it more directly, how do writers of suburban fiction adopt and refigure the myth of the global suburb? As I will demonstrate, we once again see an emphasis on presence, a demand for hospitality that disrupts contractualism and the imposition of firmly defined roles, imagining neighbors – even ethnic or national neighbors – as infinitely different and unknowable. I find this global revision of critical hospitality in the work of two such authors, Philip Roth and Gish Jen, who set their stories of ethnic and national contestation in the yards and playgrounds of American suburbs. The Jews of Roth's Weequahic novels forgo the ghettos to which ethnic others were once shunned for an ethnically homogenous New Jersey neighborhood, hoping to claim the American Dream while still retaining their Jewish identities – a goal that the novels, particularly *American Pastoral* and *Nemesis*, reject as untenable. Conversely, Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* presents the lack of national cohesion as both integral to the modern suburb and essential to identity formation. Like the works examined throughout my study, these novels assert suburbia as the prime setting for these interpersonal, international contests.

Nixon's elevation of suburbia into a key figure in the global order anticipates the identitarian conflicts that would play out within the space, a battle that has been both imagined and refigured by the fictions examined in the preceding chapters. The contingent communities imagined by these stories become of greater import in the period of global late capitalism, with some key differences: where societies consisting of homeowners and married couples are practical and personal, Nixon's rhetoric links suburban living to a single, cohesive American identity – an imagined community held

together by an ideological bond. In the increasingly global post-Cold War era, this implication is felt most keenly not by the middle-class whites to whom it was initially extended, but by those who, despite living within the nation's borders, have been excluded from its promises. For these outcasts, the suburbs take on a greater symbolic meaning, as inclusion in the local imagined community of suburbanites means entry into the larger imagined community of Americans, even if legal and systematic obstacles still remain.⁴ But as the rhetoric and reality of the American dream clash on Elm Streets across the country – from the race-based riots in 1960s and 70s Detroit and St. Louis to more recent post-9/11 violence against Sikhs and Muslims – writers of suburban fiction have questioned not only the possibility of attaining an American character through suburbia, but the entire notion of cohesive national identities. Such conflicts are central to the American Dream myths retold by authors like Philip Roth and Gish Jen, whose stories of contest and rejection position the space as the prime relational nexus in the period of late capitalism.

These authors perform this work by addressing the communal aspects of the American Dream, which have been present since the phrase was popularized in 1931. Although it first appeared in journalist Walter Lippmann's 1914 book *Drift and Mastery*, the concept was best articulated in James Trunslow Adams's *The Epic of America*, who repeatedly referred to

that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of

ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it. (qtd. in White and Hanson 3)

The phrase almost immediately captured the public imagination, effectively articulating an ethos of achievement implicit in the Constitution, the work of Romantics like Emerson and Thoreau, the Western pioneers, the Beats, and Civil Rights crusaders.⁵ While the notion is most often associated with the protestant belief in individual achievement through hard work that observers like Tocqueville and Weber considered inherent to Americans, historian Jim Cullen argues that the dream has acted as a type of “shared ground ... binding together people who may have otherwise little in common and may even be hostile to one another;” it is a “kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone – from corporate executives to hip-hop artists – can presumably understand” (189, 6). Against Cullen’s lofty language, the American Dream has casted a dark shadow, implying an exceptionalism that some have invoked as an excuse for racism and jingoism. Furthermore, the physical and metaphysical elements of American Dream rhetoric – “the spiritualization of property and consumption, the investment of joy and dignity in consumption and property ownership” – can amount to little more than glorified consumerism (Kimmage 28). Yet despite these shortcomings – or perhaps because of them – the disenfranchised have called upon the Dream to assert their rights, using that “lingua franca” to speak in a manner the nation would understand. In doing so, they assume the existence of a great community of Americans and demand inclusion into it.

As Cullen observes, the modern American Dream might greatly differ from the “nation of yeoman farmers” imagined by founders like Jefferson, but “the suburbanization of the United States realized a Jeffersonian vision of small stakeholders” (151). Whatever its vagaries, the Dream has always been one of property, which, since the mid-1940s, is most often realized within a suburban context – a point made by nearly every historian chronicling the rise of suburbia.⁶ More strikingly, the conflation between the Dream and suburban living has been a central part of ad campaigns launched by hundreds of real estate companies; for example, the Fannie May company – the government sponsored lender christened by *The Financial Times* as “Savior of the Suburbs” – declared, “We are in the American Dream business.” Even those who predict the downfall of the suburban model couch their invectives in the language of the American Dream: Kenneth Jackson predicts the end of suburbia because the model has put the American Dream out of the average homebuyer’s reach; the environmentalist Sierra Club famously distributed a pamphlet that labeled sprawl the “Downside of the American Dream;” Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck’s oft-cited New Urbanist handbook claims current practices have resulted in the “Decline of the American Dream;” Douglas Morris employs much more vivid language to insist that the suburbs have “paved over the American Dream” and “twisted it into a nightmare” (12,82). Within all this doom and gloom, the message is clear: the suburbs should be a manifestation of the American Dream, a way to claim an American identity.

This assumption continues to have the most significance among those who have been excluded from the Dream, those who see a house and a yard not only as a good in

itself, but as a means for inclusion in a perceived community heretofore unavailable to them. Certainly some suburbanites considered their neighborhoods the ideal space to welcome these others, such as sociologist Herbert J. Gans, who insisted that the homogeneity so closely associated with suburbia “violates the American Dream of a ‘balanced’ community where people of diverse age, class, race and religion live together” (165). Historically, however, Gans’s position has been decidedly in the minority, as racial covenants, HOA pressures, and outright violence have conspired to keep African Americans, Jews, and immigrants out of their subdivisions.⁷ But as figures like Nixon used suburbia to crystallize “Americans’ sense of themselves as capable, prosperous, and free” and made it into a symbol that “stood for achievement at home — the realization of the American Dream — and American exceptionalism in the world,” strict exclusion grew increasingly untenable (Beauregard 159, 145). In recent decades, not only have suburbs become more integrated – sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently – but variations of what geographer Jon C. Teaford calls “lifestyle suburbs” have cropped up, devoted to specific ethnic groups or peoples. Indeed, instances of “black flight,” in which affluent African Americans escape the inner cities for suburbs, to say nothing of ethnic and immigrant communities, are increasing every day, replacing the ghettos of the 20th century.⁸

Unsurprisingly, this tension between political reality and ideological pretensions informs literary fiction. Long before Adams defined the American Dream, the desire for autonomy and freedom was dramatized by Huck Finn’s escape to Indian Territory, by Frederick Douglass’s act of autonomy, and by James Gatz’s Gatsby persona.⁹ In the

postwar era, American dream stories have taken a decidedly suburban turn: Tom Rath of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and Updike's Harry Angstrom cement their financial success by moving to respectable subdivisions, David Gates's Jernigan considers his home a sign of independence, and the Lamberts of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* treat their childhood in St. Jude as a badge of privilege. More recent suburban fiction features people using suburbs, whether as an act of contestation or redefinition, to perform American-ness. Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* does the former, suggesting that the adoption of white, patriarchal practices will only result in a hell of self-loathing and irresponsibility. John Edgar Wideman's Homewood trilogy, on the other hand, focuses on an exceptional neighborhood, a place of care and historical roots largely divorced from the exploitative power structures in nearby Pittsburgh. Suburban immigrant stories tend to spotlight those who use their homes as a form of assimilation, such as the Bengalese and Indian characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's work, the Iranian family in Andre Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog*, or the protagonists of Chang-rae Lee's first three novels. Whatever of their differences, each of these stories accept suburbia's role as manifestation of the American Dream, and try to claim these promises for themselves. But unlike the Lamberts or the Raths, the characters in Wideman, Lahiri, and Dubus find antagonism instead of acceptance in their neighborhoods, pressures that force them to rethink their place in the American imagination.

Philip Roth has made this conflation between suburbia and the American persona a central concern of his work, informing everything from the central novella of his first book, 1959's *Goodbye, Columbus*, to his final novel, 2010's *Nemesis*. *Columbus*

protagonist Neil Klugman best encapsulates this equivocation when, amazed by the edenic abundance and material success promised in the American Dream, he describes the affluent suburb Short Hills as a place where “Fruit grew in their refrigerator and sporting goods dropped from their trees” (43). But where Klugman is barred from entering this promised land – “real Jews” do not live there, he learns – the characters in Roth’s later work experience no such rejection, as they have created their own suburb in Weequahic, New Jersey, where they can enjoy the privileges of citizenship while protecting their ethnicity. The narrators of these novels describe Weequahic in terms that recall a Norman Rockwell painting:

a grid of locust-tree lined streets into which the Lyons farm had been partitioned during the boom years of the early twenties, [where] the first postimmigrant generation of Newarks Jews had regrouped into a community that took its inspiration more from the mainstream of American life than from the Polish shtetl their Yiddish-speaking parents had re-created around Prince Street in the impoverished Third Ward;” storytellers rhapsodize about local kids playing baseball together, local shopkeepers taking time to chat with their customers, and religious holidays celebrated with family members. (*Pastoral* 10)

But Roth troubles these pleasing images by foregrounding the narrators’ unreliability, employing those who no longer live in Weequahic and can only imagine their neighborhood through a thick nostalgic glaze. In fact, these stories often reject outright the very possibility of the American Dream, focusing on the failure or dissolution of the subdivision instead of its material success or cultural homogeny. International concerns, far exceeding any zoning board limits, bear down on residents, forcing them to redefine their national identity projects according to the realities of those in proximity; negating

not only the possibility of an ethnically-pure enclave, but even the very notion of a cohesive Jewish or American persona.¹⁰

This unreliable narration is particularly pronounced in Roth's best-known work, the 1998 Pulitzer Prize winner *American Pastoral*. The novel describes the downfall of Seymour "The Swede" Levov, the much-loved local athletic star and son of a self-made businessman, whose integration into larger American society fails when his daughter becomes a domestic terrorist. With his movie star looks and athletic prowess, the "household Apollo of the Weequahic Jews" is adored not only for his talents, but for his gentile acceptability: he represents not just the best the neighborhood has to offer, but "a boy as close to a goy as [Weequahic Jews] were going to get" (4, 10). The Swede was proof that the residents can enjoy status as Jews and Americans, and the more "Anglicized" he seems to become – leaving Weequahic for the rural New England town of Old Rimrock and marrying a Catholic beauty queen – the more he is respected by his home community. The novel is narrated by one such admirer: Nathan Zuckerman, a writer who idolized the Swede as a boy and is charged with telling his hero's life story. Although the story focuses on Levov, Zuckerman reveals at various points that he had fairly limited interaction with his subject, rendering *American Pastoral* "more of a narrative on Nathan Zuckerman and the ways in which he constructs reality and less of an explanatory tale of the enigmatic Swede" (Royal 199). As such, Zuckerman's story is a communal myth delineating the dangers of (con)fusing two disparate national identities, as indicated by the headings of the three main sections – "Paradise Remembered," "The

Fall,” and “Paradise Lost” – and by the monstrous daughter sprung from the Jewish/Catholic union, who threatens to destroy the structural pillars of the United States.

While Zuckerman’s memoir might seem to condone an exclusionary approach to communal life – suggesting that the Swede would have been happier had he never left Weequahic – Arnold Mesnikoff, the narrator of *Nemesis*, brings his story to a very different conclusion. Like Zuckerman, Arnold retells the life of his childhood hero: Bucky Cantor, who ran a volunteer boy’s athletic association during a polio outbreak in the last days of World War II. He shares the Swede’s athleticism and communal respect, but Bucky is decidedly more rooted than his counterpart, as only the opportunity to fight Nazis tempts him to leave. When his poor eyesight precludes him from service in any branch of the military, Bucky devotes himself to the neighborhood youth, serving the community by training young Jewish men. But as the title suggests, *Nemesis* is less interested in the way common good forms a community, and focuses instead on the unity afforded by the presence of a common enemy. Accordingly, Roth emphasizes antagonistic solidarity, from the birth of Weequahic as a refuge from oppression to Bucky’s own sense of responsibility, the desire to teach his charges “toughness and determination, to be physically brave and physically fit and never to allow themselves to be pushed around or, just because they knew how to use their brains, to be defamed as Jewish weaklings and sissies” (28).¹¹ The narrating Arnold understands this antagonism as central to his community’s ethos, and frames it as a motivating factor in the early days of the breakout, when the disease infected all of the Newark suburbs except Weequahic, to the worst days of the plague, in which the Jewish community suffers the highest

concentration of polio cases. Arnold's story, then, is organized according to the various enemies who could potentially be the cause: teens from an Italian neighborhood who spit on a playground to "spread some polio," a mentally disabled man who regularly defecates in public, a hot dog vendor frequented by the victims, and even Bucky himself (14). But because "nobody then knew the source of the contagion," Arnold admits, "it was possible to grow suspicious of almost anything," making his story less the account of a community, and instead that of a mob, never united against anything but shadows and sounds (5).

Arnold's dichotomies are undone by the novel's closing revelation that Bucky himself was the carrier, thereby contradicting any *American Pastoral*-like racial purity plot. Where the Swede's downfall occurs when he forsakes Weequahic for the WASP countryside, Bucky never tries to be anything but pure, devoted to his people and his neighbors – even when he flees the neighborhood, he still goes to a Jewish summer camp, where he can serve a different set of young Jewish men – and is "punished" for his fidelity. The twist mirrors Roberto Esposito's contrast between *communitas* and *immunitas*, in which the latter – the desire to protect one from the wound and exposure inherent to being with others – constricts and undoes the community. Furthermore, the international aspect of these neighborhoods recalls Wai Chee Dimock's notion of "deep time," that "crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures" inherent to national identities (3). For Dimock, deep time contradicts the "standardization" of modern nationalism by positing an indebtedness that exceeds any historical dates and legal borders, making a

national persona a mix of cultural influences instead of a legal designation. To be sure, the Jews of Weequahic experience this type of exceedance: they are troubled by the actions of Hitler; they think of their relatives captured in Poland and their sons fighting in France; they remember their grandparents lives Russia, and their roots in the Middle East; they perform this remembrance in New Jersey, in an America that exterminated the Natives, that persecuted non-Christians, and that provided an economic system and infrastructure that allows them to flourish. In that sense, the neighborhood of Weequahic is not simply a residential model, but the nexus of diverse peoples and remnants of empires.

But authors like Roth never treat suburbia as a tidy place to collect these vast histories; rather, they choose a suburban setting because the place is filled with people – people who draw on deep time to give imminence to their lives, and people who live these lives in the presence of others. However impressive, honorable, and meaningful cultural histories might be, they ultimately exist to be used by individuals, and these individuals clash and respond to one another.¹² The lack of immunity on display in *Nemesis*, then, is not just the infection by the disease, but the infection of identity. The Jewish-ness of the Weequahic residents transcends their borders, becoming entangled with the nearby Italians, with the lost Native Americans evoked at Indian Hill summer camp, with the anti-Semites in the state capital. In the same way Bucky's persona is informed both by his grandfather, who taught him cultural traditions, and by the bullies who threatened him and inspired him to be an athlete and a mentor, so also are these

ethnic identities created by individuals making use of culture and by others rejecting and refracting the performance.

Even more than Roth, Gish Jen has made this suburban rejection and refraction a centerpiece of her fiction, in which cultural personas are repeatedly adopted and adapted by unlikely individuals. From her first novel *Typical American* to her recent *World and Town*, Jen's characters live on the fault lines of ethnic markers, forced to negotiate their subjectivities according to relationships with those nearby. Like the Weequahic tales, Jen's 1997 novel *Mona in the Promised Land* chooses a largely Jewish suburb as the setting for this contest of identities, in which Mona Chang, daughter of Chinese immigrants, decides to "switch" from Chinese to Jewish, a right she demands as an American. While Jen does not shy away from the conflicts raised by Mona's decision, particularly the betrayal her mother Helen feels, her comic tone emphasizes the playful and contingent aspect of selfhood construction, making even the most tense contentions a part of one's selfhood. Furthermore, Jen rejects the isolationism desired by the Weequahic residents in Roth's novels, insisting that the residential essence of suburbia precludes any notion of exclusions, that culture supersedes the limits of walls and borders when used by relational human beings. Instead of a mere contest, then, Jen's stories model a form of community that demands response through difference.

This creation is most pronounced in the way the various suburbanites enact – and insist others respect – their American Dreams. Mona's entire plan to switch, in fact, stems from her understanding of her rights as an American: "Jewish is American," she tells her mother; "American means being whatever you want, and I happened to pick

being Jewish” (49). As her frank, matter-of-fact tone indicates, Mona sees no irony in her desire: her embrace of Jewish culture does not negate her Chinese heritage, and both roles are manifestations of her American rights. Furthermore, while Mona receives the most teasing or resentment for her decision, nearly all of Jen’s characters have similarly fluid selfhoods, including a liberal teenager who seeks a cosmopolitanism that rejects ethnicity, an affluent family who gets plastic surgery to diminish their Jewish features, and a black cook who laments the rights denied him. Recalling the American Dream’s function as social glue, Jen links these figures via the appeals made to others around them, focusing on the tension wrought by such identity shifts, particularly those between Mona and her mother Helen. As an immigrant enjoying financial success in the United States, Helen is most vocal – and least self-aware – about this play of selfhoods. She admits that she has “signed up for her own house and garage,” but she exploits her neighbors’ Orientalist assumptions to construct her own version of Chinese-ness: she develops a personal history that enfolds the achievements of other cultures with her own – claiming that the Chinese people invented both paper and tomatoes – and valorizing her civilization over others: “We were wearing silk gowns with embroidery before the barbarians even thought maybe they should take a bath, get rid of their smell” (48, 42). As these insinuations indicate, the personas adopted by these characters, as idiosyncratic as they may seem, are ultimately performances for and with other people.

Jen’s attention to the conflicts and collaborations that spring out of Mona’s act of autonomy models the intersubjective process of identity formation, similar to those found in novels such as *The Virgin Suicides*, *Independence Day*, and *Rabbit Redux*. But Jen

gives these interactions a decidedly international flair, as each neighbor posits their own ideal version of “American-ness.” Once again, Jen positions Helen, who “likes a lot of American things,” as the most vocal combatant, angrily rebuking a Japanese exchange student’s racist drawings and invocation of the Rape of Nanking by hissing “This is the U.S. of A., do you hear me,” but later denying Mona’s desire for free speech by insisting “No America here! In this house, children listen to parents!” (48, 15, 250) The novel’s main narrative centers on the stresses caused by Mona’s desire to switch, which disturbs everyone from her Jewish neighbors to her African American coworkers. While some, such as the sympathetic Rabbi Horowitz emphasize the performative nature of culture, assuring Mona that becoming Jewish is the “lesson of a lifetime,” others find her decision insulting and unorthodox: for Helen, it is a rejection of her history; for some of her Jewish neighbors, it crosses a line that diminishes the significance of their culture (43). Jen offers a more pronounced example with African American Alfred who, after being unfairly fired because of Helen’s racism, dismisses Mona’s desires as selfish and futile. Alfred’s presence in the novel prevents the story from ever becoming an unproblematic tale of uplift, creating a contrast that signals Mona’s acceptance and privilege, because African Americans like him – even those within the suburb – are “never going to have no big house or no big garage, either.” No matter what they insist to call themselves, Alfred explains, “We’re never going to be Jewish, see, even if we grow our nose like Miss Mona here is planning to do. We be black motherfuckers.” (137)

The contrast between Alfred and Mona correctly identifies her position: she will always be Chinese, or at least Asian, in the eyes of her friends and neighbors, no matter

what rituals she conducts, or even the physical changes she makes. And yet, her very desire for Jewish-ness forces people to redefine what they mean by “Jewish,” in the same way it questions notions of “Chinese,” “African-American,” and “American.” These labels gain meaning through the interactions of those who claim them, through the responses and rejections of one’s neighbors. As the narrator explains,

Mona tries to imagine what it would be like to forget she’s Chinese, which is easy and hard. It is easy because by her lonesome she in fact often does. Out in the world of other people, though, Mona has people like Miss Feeble to keep the subject shiny. So here’s the question: Does the fact that Mona remembers all too well who she is make her more Jewish than, say, Barbara Gugelstein? (32)

More notably, Jen’s narrative suggests that this none of these processes – not Mona’s dream of becoming Jewish, not Helen’s version of American-ness, not Alfred’s critique of their attitudes – would be possible outside of the suburbs. Mona’s proximity to models like Barbara Gugelstein and Rabbi Horowitz, Alfred’s presence in Barbara’s guest house, and Helen’s sense of achievement by owning a home and sending her daughters to well-to-do schools all influence Mona’s potential life choices. So while she does experience pressure to conform and even a sense of exclusion, she does not simply subscribe to a binary of acceptance or rejection. Rather, Mona responds to those in proximity, even to their contentions.

The American Dream of *Mona in the Promised Land* – much like that of Roth’s *Weequahic Tales*, of Ford’s *Sportswriter* Trilogy, of Updike’s *Rabbit* tetralogy, of Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, of Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides*, and in fact of all the fictions in this study – is not so different from that of James Trunslow Adams or of even Richard

Nixon: these characters want a “better, richer, and happier life;” to live where they want and be who they wish to be. And yet, as demonstrated time and time again throughout this study, wherever these characters live, there will be others present, who cannot be determined by contractual roles or the expectations of those with whom they live. As writers like Roth and Jen illustrate, such interactions often result in a level of conflict that seems to contradict narratives such as Nixon’s, which posit suburbia as the end of the American Dream, as a place where the chosen self can live securely and freely. Moreover, these authors position this very lack of safety or peace as the constituent element of the Dream: Mona discovers who she wishes to be only by relating with other people: the interactions are not often desired or pleasant, but they are necessary and made unavoidable by the mixture of proximity and autonomy in the suburbs. People do not simply pass through – they live together, and must necessarily engage with one another as they live their lives. For that reason, within the images of disruption, conflict, and difference found in these fictions, there is also, in every case, a desire for welcome and for hospitality. The potentially dangerous and wholly unknowable other has become the neighbor next door, who may not – and, statistics show, most likely will not – share one’s beliefs and assumptions. But one’s beliefs, one’s sense of self, has no content without the interactions of others who respond to the performance, confirming and contradicting it. As these fictions suggest, the performance can never be made safe and static, but it can be made hospitable. And this dream of hospitality, of welcome and care for an unknowable, alterier neighbor, is perhaps the most enduring and necessary American Dream.

Notes

1 *New York Times* columnist William Safire, who attended the exhibit as an employee of the company that built Splitnik, recalls that the house was “not on the official tour,” but was added as a stop when Nixon’s handlers, sensing a rhetorical loss for the Vice President, were offered the chance to take Khrushchev to what they claimed was “the typical American house.”

2 Throughout the debate, both Nixon and Khrushchev were keenly aware of their audience, not just those immediately present, but those who would watch the argument on television. “We should hear you more on our televisions,” Nixon even told Khrushchev. “You should hear us more on yours.” (Perlstein 90)

3 Mark Clapson and Ray Hutchison, editors of *Suburbanization in Global Society*, lament the difficulty of examining the individual suburbs because “the Anglo-suburban idea of the good life has been appropriated for urban design in countries that were once British and European countries” (4).

4 See Singer, Hardwick, Brettell, *Twenty-First Century Gateways: Immigrant Incorporation in Suburban America*; Tavernise and Gebeloff, “Immigrants Make Paths to Suburbia, Not Cities.”

5 In the introduction to their essay collection *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White describe the wide range of definitions of the Dream, from “being able to get a high school education” to freedom to be “like Huck Finn; escape to the unknown; follow your dreams” (9, 8).

6 Several observers have noted the connection between suburbia and the American Dream. See Teaford, *The American Suburb*; Baxandall and Ewan, *Picture Windows*; Beauregard, *How American Became Suburban*; Hayden’s introduction to *Building Suburbia*.

7 See Keating, *The Suburban Racial Dilemma*; Johnson, *Black Power in the Suburbs*; Loewen, “Dreaming in Black and White.”

8 See Suro, Wilson, and Singer, “Immigration and Poverty in America’s Suburbs;” Frey, “The New Great Migration” and “Melting Pot Cities and Suburbs.”

9 A recent collection of essays, edited by Harold Bloom, surveys the literary history of American Dream narratives. J.A. Leo Lemay identifies Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* as “the definitive formulation of the American Dream” whose rags to riches story “is often commonly supposed to be the progenitor of the Horatio Alger success story of nineteenth-century American popular literature” (23).

10 This tension is hardly reserved to Roth's suburban stories. For example, the 2008 novel *Indignation* describes the fears of Newark resident Marcus Messner, who cannot shake the fear that he will be sent to war and will die in Korea.

11 In his landmark study *Postethnic America*, David Hollinger argues that, "When we now refer to a race, we most often mean to address the unequal treatment of people on the basis of biological ideas long since discredited" (35).

12 In his book *Cosmopolitanism*, K. Anthony Appiah writes "We do not need, have never needed, settled community, a homogeneous system of values, in order to have a home. Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more ... The point is that people in each place make their own uses even of the most famous global commodities." (113)

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